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Books by Frank O'Connor

THE FOUNTAIN OF MAGIC
DUTCH INTERIOR

CRAB APPLE JELLY

Stories and Tales

by

FRANK O'CONNOR

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THE BRIDAL NIGHT

It was sunset, and the two great humps of rock made a twilight in the cove where the boats were lying high up the strand. There was one light only in a little white-washed cottage. Around the headland came a boat, and the heavy dipping of its oars was like a heron's flight. The old woman was sitting on the low stone wall outside her cottage.

‘ ‘Tis a lonesome place,’ said I.

‘ ‘Tis so,’ she agreed, ‘ a lonesome place, but any place is lonesome without one you'd care for.’

‘ Your own flock are gone from you, I suppose ? ’ I asked.

‘ I never had but the one,’ she replied, ‘ the one son only,’ and I knew because she did not add a prayer for his soul that he was still alive.

‘ Is it in America he is ? I asked. (It is to America all the boys of the locality go when they leave home.)

‘ No, then,’ she replied simply. ‘ It is in the asylum in Cork he is on me these twelve years.’

I had no fear of trespassing on her emotions. These lonesome people in wild places, it is their nature to speak ; they must cry out their sorrows like the wild birds.

‘ God help us ! ’ I said. ‘ Far enough ! ’

‘ Far enough,’ she sighed. ‘ Too far for an old woman. There was a nice priest here one time brought me up in his car to see him. All the ways to this wild place he brought it, and he drove me into the city. It is a place I was never used to, but it eased my mind to see poor Denis well-cared-for and well-liked. It was a trouble to me before that, not knowing would they see what a good boy he was before his madness came on him. He knew me ; he saluted me, but he said nothing until the super-

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intendent came to tell me the tea was ready for me. Then poor Denis raised his head and says, "Leave ye not forget the toast. She was ever a great one for her bit of toast." It seemed to give him ease and he cried after. A good boy he was and is. It was like him after seven long years to think of his old mother and her little bit of toast.'

'God help us,' I said, for her voice was like the birds', hurrying high, immensely high, in the coloured light, out to sea to the last islands where their nests were.

'Blessed be His Holy Will,' the old woman added, 'there is no turning aside what is in store. It was a teacher that was here at the time. Miss Regan her name was. She was a fine big jolly girl from the town. Her father had a shop there. They said she had three hundred pounds to her own cheek the day she set foot in the school, and — 'tis hard to believe but 'tis what they all said : I will not belie her — 'twasn't banished she was at all, but she came here of her own choice, for the great liking she had for the sea and the mountains. Now, that is the story, and with my own eyes I saw her, day in day out, coming down the little pathway you came yourself from the road, and sitting beyond there in a hollow you can hardly see, out of the wind. The neighbours could make nothing of it, and she being a stranger, and with only the book Irish, they left her alone. It never seemed to take a peg out of her, only sitting in that hole in the rocks, as happy as the day is long, reading her little book or writing her letters. Of an odd time she might bring one of the little scholars along with her to be picking posies.

'That was where my Denis saw her. He'd go up to her of an evening and sit on the grass beside her, and off and on he might take her out in the boat with him. And she'd say with that big laugh of hers, "Denis is my beau." Those now were her words and she meant

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no more harm by it than the child unborn, and I knew it and Denis knew it, and it was a little joke we had, the three of us. It was the same way she used to joke about her little hollow. "Mrs. Sullivan," she'd say, "leave no one near it. It is my nest and my cell and my little prayer-house, and maybe I would be like the birds and catch the smell of the stranger and then fly away from ye all." It did me good to hear her laugh, and whenever I saw Denis moping or idle I would say it to him myself, "Denis, why wouldn't you go out and pay your attentions to Miss Regan and all saying you are her intended?" It was only a joke. I would say the same thing to her face, for Denis was such a quiet boy, no way rough or accustomed to the girls at all — and how would he in this lonesome place?

'I will not belie her ; it was she saw first that poor Denis was after more than company, and it was not to this cove she came at all then but to the little cove beyond the headland, and 'tis hardly she would go there itself without a little scholar along with her. "Ah," says I, for I missed her company, "isn't it the great stranger Miss Regan is becoming ?" and Denis would put on his coat and go hunting in the dusk till he came to whatever spot she was. Little ease that was to him, poor boy, for he lost his tongue entirely, and lying on his belly before her, chewing an old bit of grass, is all he would do till she got up and left him. He could not help himself, poor boy. The madness was on him, even then, and it was only when I saw the plunder done that I knew there was no cure for him only to put her out of his mind entirely. For 'twas madness in him and he knew it, and that was what made him lose his tongue — he that was maybe without the price of an ounce of 'baccy — I will not deny it : often enough he had to do without it when the hens would not be laying, and often enough stirabout and praties was all we had for days. And

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there was she with money to her name in the bank ! And that wasn't all, for he was a good boy ; a quiet, good-natured boy, and another would take pity on him, knowing he would make her a fine steady husband, but she was not the sort, and well I knew it from the first day I laid eyes on her, that her hand would never rock the cradle. There was the madness out and out.

' So here was I, pulling and hauling, coaxing him to stop at home, and hiding whatever little thing was to be done till evening the way his hands would not be idle. But he had no heart in the work, only listening, always listening, or climbing the cnucean to see would he catch a glimpse of her coming or going. And oh, Mary, the heavy sigh he'd give when his bit of supper was over and I bolting the door for the night, and he with the long hours of darkness forninst him — my heart was broken, thinking of it. It was the madness, you see. It was on him. He could hardly sleep or eat, and at night I would hear him, turning and groaning as loud as the sea on the rocks.

' It was then when the sleep was a fever to him that he took to walking in the night. I remember well the first night I heard him lift the latch. I put on my few things and went out after him. It was standing here I heard his feet on the stile. I went back and latched the door and hurried after him. What else could I do, and this place terrible after the fall of night with rocks and hills and water and streams, and he, poor soul, blinded with the dint of sleep. He travelled the road apace, and then took to the hills, and I followed him with my legs all torn with briers and furze. It was over by the doctor's house beyond that he gave up. He turned to me then the way a little child that is running away turns and clings to your knees ; he turned on me and said, " Mother, we'll go home now. It was the bad day for you ever you brought me into the world." And as the

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day was breaking I got him back to bed and covered him up to sleep.

‘ I was hoping in time he would wear himself out, but it was worse he was getting. I was a strong woman then, a mayen-strong woman. I could cart a load of seaweed or dig a field with any man, but the night walking broke me. I knelt one night before the Blessed Virgin and I prayed whatever was to happen, it would happen while the light of life was in me, the way I would not be leaving him lonesome like that in a wild place.

‘ And it happened the way I prayed. Blessed be God, he woke that night or the next night on me and he roaring. I went into him but I could not hold him. He had the strength of five men. So I went out and locked the door behind me. It was down the hill I faced in the starlight to the little house above the cove. The Donoghues came with me : I will not belie them ; they were fine powerful men and good neighbours. The father and the two sons came with me and brought the rope from the boats. It was a hard struggle they had of it and a long time before they got him on the floor, and a longer time before they got the ropes on him. And when they had him tied they put him back into bed for me, and I covered him up, nice and decent, and put a hot stone to his feet to take the chill of the cold floor off him.

‘ Sean Donoghue spent the night sitting beside the fire with me, and in the morning he sent one of the boys off for the doctor. Then Denis called me in his own voice and I went into him. Sean Donoghue came with me. “ Mother,” says Denis, “ will you leave me this way against the time they come for me ? ” I hadn’t the heart. God knows I hadn’t. “ Don’t do it, Peg,” says Sean. “ If ’twas a hard job trussing him before, it will be harder the next time and I won’t answer for it.”

“ You are a kind neighbour, Sean,” says I, “ and I

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would never make little of you, but he is the only son I ever reared and I'd sooner he'd kill me now than to shame him at the last."

' So I loosened the ropes on him and he lay there very quiet all day without breaking his fast. Coming on to evening he asked me for the sup of tea and he drank it, and soon after the doctor and another man came in the car. They said a few words to Denis but he made them no answer, and the doctor gave me the bit of writing. " It will be tomorrow before they come for him," says he, " and 'tisn't right for you to be alone in the house with the man." But I said I would stop with him and Sean Donoghue said the same.

' When darkness came on there was a little bit of a wind blew up from the sea and Denis began to rave to himself, and it was her name he was calling all the time. " Winnie," that was her name, and it was the first time I heard it spoken. " Who is that he is calling ? " says Sean. " It is the schoolmistress," says I, " for though I do not recognise the name, I know 'tis no one else he would be asking for." " That is a bad sign," says Sean. " He will get worse as the night goes on and the wind rises. 'Twould be better for me go down and get the boys to put the ropes on him again while he's quiet." And it was then something struck me and I said, " Maybe if she came to him herself for a minute he would be quiet after." " We can try it anyway," says Sean, " and if the girl has a kind heart she will come."

' It was Sean that went up for her. I would not have the courage to ask her. Her little house is there on the edge of the hill ; you can see it as you go back the road with the bit of garden before it the new teacher left grow wild. And it was a true word Sean said, for 'twas worse Denis was getting, shouting out against the wind for us to get Winnie for him. Sean was a long time away, or maybe I felt it long, and I thought it might

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be the way she was afeared to come. There are many like that, small blame to them. Then I heard her step that I knew so well on the boreen beside the house and I ran to the door, meaning to say I was sorry for the trouble we were giving her, but when I opened the door Denis called out her name in a loud voice, and the crying fit came on me, thinking how light-hearted we used to be together.

'I couldn't help it and she pushed in past me into the bedroom with her face as white as that wall. The candle was lighting on the dresser. He turned to her roaring with the mad look in his eyes, and then went quiet all of a sudden, seeing her like that overright him with her hair all tumbled in the wind. I was coming behind her. I heard it. He put up his two poor hands and the red mark of the ropes on his wrists and whispered to her, "Winnie, asthore, isn't it the long time you were away from me?"

"It is, Denis, it is indeed," says she, "but you know I couldn't help it."

"Don't leave me any more now, Winnie," says he, and then he said no more, only the two eyes lighting out on her as she sat by the bed. And Sean Donoghue brought in the little stooleen for me, and there we were, the three of us talking, and Denis paying us no attention, only staring at her. Then all at once he got excited and sat up in the bed.

"Winnie," says he, "lie down here beside me."

"Oye," says Sean, humouring him, "don't you know the poor girl is played out after her day's work? She must go home to bed."

"No, no, no," says Denis, and the terrible mad light in his eyes. "There is a high wind blowing and 'tis no night for one like her to be out. Leave her sleep here beside me. Leave her creep under the clothes to me the way I'll keep her warm."

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“ ‘ Oh, oh, oh, oh,’ says I, “ indeed and indeed, Miss Regan, ’tis I’m sorry for bringing you here. ’Tisn’t my son is talking at all but the madness in him. I’ll go now,’ says I, “ and bring Sean’s boys to put the ropes on him again.

“ ‘ No, Mrs. Sullivan,’ says she in a quiet voice, “ don’t do that at all. I’ll stop here with him and he’ll go fast asleep. Won’t you, Denis ? ”

“ ‘ I will, I will,’ says he, “ but come under the clothes to me. There does a terrible draught blow under that door.”

“ ‘ I will indeed, Denis,’ says she, “ if you’ll promise me you’ll go to sleep.”

“ ‘ Oye, whisht, girl ! ’ says I. “ ’Tis you that’s mad. While you’re here you’re in my charge, and how would I answer to your father if you stopped here by yourself ? ”

“ ‘ Never mind about me, Mrs. Sullivan,’ she said. “ I’m not a bit in dread of Denis. I promise you there will no harm come to me. You and Mr. Donoghue can sit outside in the kitchen and I’ll be all right here.”

‘ She had a worried look, but there was something about her there was no mistaking. I wouldn’t take it on myself to cross the girl. We went out to the kitchen, Sean and myself, and we heard every whisper that passed between them. She got into the bed beside him : I heard her. He was whispering into her ear the sort of foolish things boys do be saying at that age, and then we heard no more, only the pair of them breathing. I went to the room door and looked in. He was lying with his arm about her and his head on her bosom, sleeping like a child, sleeping like he slept in his good days with no worry at all on his poor face. She did not look at me and I did not speak to her. My heart was too full. God help us, it was an old song of my father’s that was going through my head : “ Lonely Rock is the one wife my children will know.”

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' Later on the candle went out and I did not light another. I wasn't a bit afraid of her then. The storm blew up and he slept through it all, breathing nice and even. When it was light I made a cup of tea for her and beckoned her from the room door. She loosened his hold and slipped out of bed. Then he stirred and opened his eyes.

" " Winnie," says he, " where are you going ? "

" " I'm going to work, Denis," says she. " Don't you know I must be at the school early ? "

" " But you'll come back to me tonight, Winnie ? " says he.

" " I will, Denis," says she. " I'll come back, never fear."

' And he turned on his side and went fast sleep again.

' When she walked into the kitchen I went on my two knees before her and kissed her hands. I did so. There would no words come to me, and we sat there, the three of us, over our tea, and I declare for the time being I felt 'twas nearly worth it all, all the troubles of his birth and rearing and all the lonesome years ahead.

' It was a great ease to us. Poor Denis never stirred, and when the police came he went along with them without commotion or handcuffs or anything that would shame him and all the words he said to me was, " Mother, tell Winnie I'll be expecting her."

' And isn't it a strange and wonderful thing ? From that day to the day she left us there did no one speak a bad word about what she did, and the people couldn't do enough for her. Isn't it a strange thing, and the world as wicked as it is, that no one would say the bad word about her ? '

Darkness had fallen over the Atlantic, blank grey to its farthest reaches.

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TELL your mother I'll be home in five minutes. Five minutes, remember that ! Tell me how many seconds in five minutes and I'll give you a penny. You can't ? What sort of schooling do ye get nowadays ? Three hundred, of course. There's the penny, and tell your mother I'll be home in exactly three hundred seconds.

Poor kid ! They hate being kept waiting. I was the same myself. I remember when I was his age my old man — God rest him ! — used to take me to the seaside of an odd Sunday, and always the same place — the best scenery and the best air ; so he said. Well, 'twas a nightmare to me, a real horror. No, mind you, no ! 'Twasn't drink so much at all. Wait now and I'll tell you.

Sunday morning the bells would be ringing for Mass and the father before the mirror over the fireplace, dragging at the old dickey, and the mother standing on a low stool in front of him, trying to fasten the studs. 'Go easy now,' she'd say. 'Ah, go easy, can't you ?' and he with his head down, shivering and rearing like a bucking broncho. 'God Almighty, give me patience !' he'd say between his teeth. 'Give me patience, sweet God, before I tear the bloody house asunder !' And to see him after, going to Mass, you wouldn't think butter would melt in the old devil's mouth.

After Mass, while we were standing under the trees on the river-bank, J. J. would come along. J. J. and the father were lifelong friends. He was a melancholy, reedy man with a long sallow face and big hollows under the cheeks, and whenever he had his mind on something, he sucked in the two cheeks till his whole face caved in like a sandpit. And as we sauntered along down a side street, J. J. would stop and look round and whisper

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something to my da. Then he rapped with his knuckles on a door and turned round and winked. After a minute he'd bend down and look in through the keyhole and whisper in ; something very consoling to judge by the face he put on. Then my da would suddenly toss his head.

' Two minutes now,' he'd say briskly, raising two fingers to show what he meant. Then he'd dive down into his trousers pockets and out would come a penny.

' There's a penny for you now,' he'd say. ' Mind and be a good boy.'

I remember one Sunday in particular when the two of them left me like that. I looked round and saw a little girl standing on the kerb. She was wearing a frilly white hat and a white satiny dress. The same day — I remember it well — I had on a brand-new sailor suit. She was a beautiful child ; upon my word, a beautiful child ! And whatever way it happened, I smiled at her. Mind you, I meant no harm. It was pure good-nature. I was always like that, wanting to make friends. But lo and behold, she drew herself up, withered me with a look and then walked past me up the pavement.

That stare knocked me flat. It knocked me kicking. That's the sort I am by nature, expecting everyone to be friendly. I was stunned. I didn't know which way to look. Then my da came out with his face all shiny, shaking out the big silk handkerchief he carried up his sleeve and wiping his moustache. He must have seen something ailed me, for he began to laugh and tell me all about the grand times we were going to have at the seaside. But that was all propaganda, for before ever we reached the boat he had another call.

' Two minutes,' he says with his rogue's smile and the two fingers up. ' Be a good boy now.' And he tipped me a second penny.

Then we got on the boat and the band was playing on deck and the hillsides with all the big houses and

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gardens were dropping behind. And who do you think I saw, coming up the side of the deck towards us, only the little girl that gave me the cold shoulder. Her father was along with her, a little fat, red-faced man with a big black beard and a bowler hat, and under his arm he carried a boat with masts and sails. When my da spotted him he threw back his head and laughed.

‘ Well, my old flower,’ he said with his rogue’s smile, ‘ so ’tis here I find you ? ’

‘ The last place I expected to see you,’ says the fat man none too pleasantly.

‘ Back to the old ship ? ’ said my da, winking at J. J.

‘ Meaning what exactly ? ’ asked the fat man, twirling his beard in his fingers.

‘ My goodness,’ says my da, letting on to be surprised, ‘ didn’t you say ’twas aboard a paddle steamer in Cork Harbour you did your sailoring ? ’

‘ Ever in Odessa ? ’ says the fat man.

‘ I had a cousin there,’ says my da, kidding him.

‘ One of the big-wigs, I believe.’

‘ You hadn’t a cousin in Valparaiso by any chance ? ’ asks the fat man.

‘ Well, no, now,’ says my da regretfully. ‘ That cousin died young of a Maltese fever he contracted while he was with Nansen at the North Pole.’

‘ Malta, Madeira, Toulouse, Genoa and Casablanca,’ says the fat man. ‘ Ye know nothing only all the old guff ye have.’

By this time there was no holding them. The fat man was a sailor, and whatever the reason was, my da was death on sailors. They went into the saloon, and all the way down the river they never as much as shoved their noses out. When I looked in, half the bar was stuck in the argument ; some in favour of the sea and some against it ; some saying sailors made the best husbands and others that only a fool would marry one.

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‘They see the world anyway,’ says the sailor.

‘Do they?’ said my da very quietly, bowing his head and raising his eyebrows. ‘What do they see of it?’

‘Malta,’ said the sailor, ‘where the heat of the day drives off the cold of the night.’

‘Anything else?’ asked my da in a far-away voice, looking out the door.

‘San Francisco,’ said the sailor, ‘and the scent of the orange blossoms in the moonlight.’

‘Anything else?’ asked my da, like a priest at confession.

‘As much more as you fancy,’ said the sailor.

‘But do they see what’s under their very noses?’ asked my da, leaping up with his fists clenched and his eyes lighting. ‘Do they see the beauty of that river outside that people come thousands of miles to see?’

I looked round, and there was the little girl at my elbow.

‘ ‘Tis all your fault,’ says she.

‘How is it my fault?’ says I.

‘You and your old fellow,’ says she, ‘ye have my day ruined on me.’

And she walked away again with her head in the air. I didn’t see her again till we landed, and by that time her old fellow and mine had to be separated. I saw the two of them go off along the sea road. We went in the opposite direction. Suddenly my da stopped and raised his fists in the air.

‘I declare to my God,’ he said venomously, ‘if there’s one class of man I can’t stand, ’tis sailors.’

‘Ah, they’re all old blow,’ says J. J. peaceably enough.

‘Blow?’ says my da. ‘Who’s talking about blow? I wouldn’t mind how much blow they had only for all the flaming lies they tell you. I’m going back now,’ says he beginning to stamp from one foot to the other, ‘and I’ll tell *him* a few lies.’

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'Ah, don't bother,' says J. J. He leaned his head over my da's shoulder with that sort of melancholy look he had and began to whisper in his ear the way you'd whisper to a restive young horse, and my da sniffing and nodding and rearing his head. Next minute up went the two fingers.

'Two minutes,' he said with his cute little smile. 'Be a good boy now.'

He slipped me another copper, and I sat on the sea wall watching the crowds, and wondering would we ever get out of the village. Beyond the village were the cliffs, and little lanes winding in and out and up and down past cottages built on them, and the band playing and the people dancing. Then my heart gave a leap. Coming through the crowd I saw the sailor and the little girl, swinging out of his arm. This time she was carrying the boat. They stopped in front of the pub.

'Daddy,' I heard her say in that precise, ladylike little voice of hers, 'you promised to sail my boat for me.'

'In one second now,' says the sailor. 'I have a certain thing to say to a man in here.'

He went into the pub. The little girl turned on me with tears in her eyes.

'Tis all your fault,' she said again.

I was sorry for her. Mind you, I was. That's the sort I am, very soft-hearted. Away with me into the pub. Her father was sitting on the window-sill with the wire screen behind him and all the white yachts on the shiny bay beyond. My da was walking up and down before him with his head bent, like a tiger.

'Capwell?' I heard him say in a low, musical sort of voice.

'Capwell I said,' says the sailor, wiping his moustache.

'Evergreen?' asked my da.

'Evergreen,' said the sailor, nodding.

'The oldest stock in Cork?' said my da in a whisper.

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' Back to the fifteenth century,' said the sailor.

My da looked at him with a smile gathering on his face as if he thought the man must be joking. Then he shook his head and walked to the other side of the bar as much as to say ' This is beyond me.'

' The North side of the city,' said the sailor, getting heated, ' what is it only foreigners? People that came in from beyond the lamps a generation ago. Tramps and fiddlers and pipers.'

' They had the intellect,' said my da quietly, putting one hand in his trousers pocket and cocking his head at the sailor.

' Intellect? ' said the sailor. ' The North side? '

' 'Twas always given up to them,' said my da with a sniff.

' That's the first I heard of it,' said the sailor.

My da looked at him. He took the hand out of his pocket and began to do sums on the palm of it with one finger.

' I'll give you fair odds,' he said. ' I'll go back a hundred years. Tell me the name of a single outstanding man that was born on the North side of the city in that time.'

' Daddy,' said I, pulling him by the coat tails, ' come on away.'

' Two minutes now,' he said with a laugh, and almost by second nature he handed me another penny.

That was four I had. J. J. was a thoughtful poor soul and he followed me out with two bottles of lemonade and a couple of packets of biscuits, and after that the little girl and myself tried to sail the boat. Whatever was wrong, it would only float on its side and the sails got wringing wet, so we left it to dry and sat listening to the organ of the merry-go-rounds from the other side of the harbour.

It wasn't until late afternoon that the sailor came out.

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My da was with him, and there seemed to be only the breath of life between them. My da was holding him by the lapel of the jacket and begging him to wait for the boat, but the sailor said he gave his solemn word to the wife to have the little girl home for bedtime. Then my da threw a long lingering look at the sky, and seeing it so late, he slipped me another penny — that was five — and went back to the pub till the siren blew for the boat. They were hauling up the gangway when J. J. got him down.

It was late when we landed home and the full moon riding over the river, a lovely, frosty, September night. I was tired and hungry and blown up with wind. We went up the hill in the moonlight and every few yards my da stopped to lay down the law. By that time he was ready to argue with anyone about anything. There were three old women sitting on the cathedral steps, gossiping, and their shawls trailing down to the pavement. It made me sick for home and a cup of hot cocoa and my own warm bed. And there, standing at the street corner under a gas-lamp, I saw a figure in white with a white hat on it. My heart nearly stopped beating. I don't know if J. J. saw the same thing, but all at once he began to steer my da, drawing his attention to the cathedral.

‘That’s a fine tower,’ he said.

My da stopped and looked up at it and you could see he didn’t think much of it.

‘What’s fine about it?’ he said. ‘I don’t see anything very fine about it.’

‘Ah, ’tis, man, ’tis,’ says J. J. ‘That’s a great tower.’

‘Now, I’m not much in favour of towers,’ said my da, tossing his head. ‘I don’t see what use are towers. I’d sooner a nice plain limestone front with pillars.’

I tried to lug him along by the hand. He looked round and spotted the white figure at the other side of

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the road. Then he chuckled and put his hand over his eyes, like a sailor on deck.

‘ Hard a-port, mate,’ says he. ‘ What do I see on my starboard bow ? ’

‘ Ah, nothing, man,’ said J. J.

‘ Ah, what sort of bloody look-out man are you ? ’ said my da. ‘ Ahoy, shipmate,’ he calls across the road, ‘ didn’t your old skipper go home yet ? ’

‘ He did not,’ said the little girl — it was the little girl, of course — ‘ and let you leave him alone.’

‘ The thundering ruffian ! ’ said my da, delighted, and away he went across the road like a greyhound. ‘ What do he mean ? ’ says he. ‘ A sailorman from the South side, drinking in my diocese ? I’ll have him ejected.’

‘ Daddy,’ says I with my heart in my boots, ‘ come on home.’

‘ Two minutes,’ he said with a chuckle, and he handed me a copper, the sixth and the last. The little girl sprang at him. She scrawled him and beat him about the legs but he only laughed at her, and when the door opened he slipped in with a shout.

‘ Anyone here from Buenos Aires ? ’

J. J. sucked in his cheeks till he looked like a skeleton in the moonlight and then he nodded his head sadly and went in after him. The door was shut, the old boat was standing against the wall. The old women got up and went shuffling off down a lane, and there we were with the whole cathedral square to ourselves. We sat on the kerb and cried salt tears. The little girl turned on me.

‘ What bad luck was on me,’ she said, ‘ to meet you this morning ? ’

‘ Twas on me the bad luck was,’ said I, ‘ and your old fellow keeping my old fellow out. I’d have him half-way home now only for ye.’

‘ Your old fellow is only a common labouring man,’

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she said, ‘and my daddy says he’s ignorant and full of conceit.’

‘And your old fellow is only a seaman,’ said I, ‘and my father says all seamen are liars.’

‘How dare you !’ she said. ‘My daddy is not a liar, and I hope he keeps your old fellow all night now, just to piece you out for being saucy.’

‘I don’t care,’ said I, ‘I can go home when I like.’

‘You’ll have to wait for your father,’ she said.

‘I needn’t,’ said I.

‘I dare you,’ said she. ‘You and your sailor suit.’

I couldn’t let that pass, so I got up and took a few steps, to show off. I thought she’d be afraid to stay behind alone. But she wasn’t, she was too bitter, and I stopped.

‘Coward !’ she said venomously. ‘You’re afraid.’

‘I’ll show you am I afraid,’ said I, and away with me down the road, I that was never out after dark before. Every few yards I stopped, hoping she’d call me back. She never made a sound and every dark lane I came to I shut my eyes, in dread of what I might see. There wasn’t a sound, only steps going up this flight of cobbled steps or down that one, and when I came to the foot of the long road home, and the first dark archway with the moon shining through it, my courage gave out. I couldn’t go on or go back. I was paralysed.

Then I saw a little huxter shop with a long flight of steps up to the door, and iron railings all bent, and I crept up the steps for company. I could see the basement below and the little window above with bits of crinkly red paper, a couple of sweet-bottles and a few toys. And then I saw something that raised my spirits. I counted my coppers again before I went in and rattled on the counter. A little old Mother Hubbard of a woman with a broken back came out, rubbing her hands in her apron.

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' This and that, ma'am,' said I, mentioning what I wanted.

' Have you the sixpence ? ' she asked in a prickly voice.

I took out my pennies and laid them on the counter before her, and she went to the window and brought me out my treasure. I went down the steps and up the road home with my head in the air, whistling. I only wished the little girl could see me now ; she wouldn't say I was a coward. Every lane I passed, I stopped to look at the view. Lovely ! Roofs and roofs and roofs, rising up from the river and the moonlight over them all.

When my mother opened the door and saw me standing there she nearly fainted. She never noticed what I had in my arms till I put it on the mat before the fire to warm. . . .

Now, didn't I say already I'd be home in five minutes ? What way is this to carry on ? Not at all ! 'Tisn't five minutes at all yet. Run along home now and tell your mother I'm on the way. . . .

What was I saying ? Oh, yes, about the dog. 'Twas a dog, of course, a black woolly dog with two beads for eyes. I have to laugh whenever I think of it.

Well, lads, finish these and have another. Miss Mac !

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'THE Plough?' said my uncle's voice from the front gate. 'Do you mean to say you don't know the Plough? That's the Plough, man, up there. And over there, low down, above the lighthouse — d'ye see? — the ruffian with the red head, that's Orion. Just so! Irish, of course; an old Tipperary family, armed to the teeth.'

I chuckled as his maudlin voice called it all up: the starlight over the sleeping town of which he was Town Clerk; the world's worst Town Clerk, but that's neither here nor there. For an hour or more I lay listening to himself and the maid gossiping in the kitchen, and their mumbling voices and the hissing of the range half lulled me to sleep. Then I heard him get up, and Nora began to whisper in protest till he grew crotchety. 'Now, can't you—?' I heard him hiss. 'I'm all right, girl. I won't say anything to her.' I wondered which of the girls he wanted to talk to. He came upstairs quietly; I knew he wasn't coming to bed because he hadn't locked the doors. As I heard him try the handle of the girls' door I slipped out of bed and put on a dressing-gown.

'Halloaaa,' he said at last in a long, whimsical, insinuating drawl.

'Hallo,' piped my cousin Josie in her high-pitched, timid voice.

'Is Mon asleep?' he asked.

'She is. . . . No, she isn't, though. You're after waking her.'

'Oh, dear, dear!' he said.

'Is that you, daddy?' said Monica, sleepy and cross, 'what time is it?'

Curiosity was too much for me. I opened my bedroom door. He heard it, rushed out and clawed me in

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after him, beaming at me. I knew from the smell he must have been on the skite again. He was a tall, gaunt, melancholy-looking man. I worshipped him and he never saw it, the old idiot. Often when we met in town he went by without noticing me, lost in his own thoughts, his hands behind his back, his head bowed into the collar of his overcoat, while his lips moved as if he were talking to himself. If I stopped him he started out of his reverie with an animation and a wealth of gesture that was entirely fictitious ; a laugh too loud, a glare of the deep-set fanatical eyes, a flush on the hollow temples and high cheek-bones, while he leaned forward or sideways like a yacht in a gale in a long, raking, astonished line, clawing madly at his hat or at the flapping skirts of his coat. It wasn't wishing to me to break in on him.

'Come in, Willie,' he said, laughing, 'come in, boy ! I was only just saying to Nora that I hardly ever get the chance of a talk with ye.'

The candle on the dressing-table exaggerated the slashing line of his head with the high, bald, narrow cranium, the high cheek-bones and sunken temples and eyes — the face of an El Greco saint. He swept the chair clean with a wave of his hand and held it out to me. Then he sat himself on the end of the bed and gave each of us a quizzical look, his mouth puckered up and his eyes in slits as if he was trying to keep in his laughter.

'And now what are we going to talk about ?' he asked archly. 'Here we are, the whole family. We have everything : the setting, the time, the company. What are we going to discuss ?'

'Tell us a story, can't you ?' said Josie. She had continued to gape at him with her big, scared brown eyes, the bed-clothes drawn close under her chin, from modesty. I was sorry for her. She was always afraid of him when he had a drop taken. She was like that ; a gentle, nun-like soul, not like Monica who went through

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town with a sailor stride, north-east, north-west, cracking jokes with everyone. On Sunday mornings poor Josie would come tapping at the Boss's door to tell him he'd be late for Mass, and then stand uncertainly in the hall with a flush on her cheeks and the same wide, uncomprehending stare in her great brown eyes. I liked Josie and I could have killed that little sugar, Hennessey, when he let her down.

'Story?' said the Boss with a laugh, drawing away from her in mock surprise. 'Sure, my goodness, ye're too big for stories.'

'Not for good ones,' said Monica.

'What sort of story?' he asked, frowning and sucking in his cheeks till the whole hollow cage of his skull stood out.

'Well, for instance, what you and Owney Mac were up to tonight,' Monica said saucily.

'Me and Owney—?' he exclaimed with a worried look. 'No, no, Mon, 'pon my soul, I wasn't. I just happened to drop in for a minute.' Then his face cleared; he smiled and winked. 'Go away, you ruffian!' he said.

'A story?' he continued musingly with his head in the air. 'I wonder now could I think of a little story that came into my head tonight. Let me think! What was it? About a young fellow, a rather simple young fellow, but nice. . . . I want you to remember that. He was nice. . . . Damn it, who was it told me or did I read it somewhere? Never mind, 'twill come back to me. . . . And a long time ago he came to live in a certain town. He had a job there; a good enough job for the town, but nothing much outside. Of course, he was hoping for promotion. We'll call him the Grand Vizier.'

'It must have been in Turkey so,' Monica cried, lifting herself on her elbow.

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'Exactly !' my uncle exclaimed excitedly, punching his left palm with his fist. "'Pon my word, Mon, you have it ! Turkey ! The very place. The name of the town will come back to me too in a minute. Not that 'twould mean anything to ye ; a miserable place ; a dirty old Eastern town with houses falling down at every step ; mountains of dirt in the streets, and the unfortunate people living on top of one another, in filthy holes and corners, like savages — the way they live in Turkey. And this young fellow — he was a bit foolish, I told you that — thought he'd be a great fellow and change it all.'

'And marry the Sultan's daughter,' chimed in Monica with her ringing laugh.

'What Sultan's daughter ?' my uncle exclaimed testily. 'I said nothing about a Sultan's daughter ! Now, my goodness, can't you let me tell the story my own way ? This young fellow was married already — sure, I told ye he was simple.'

'Oh !' said Monica. She was disappointed.

'He was from Constantinople,' my uncle said impatiently, articulating every syllable and emphasising it with his fist while his forehead took on a certain resemblance to Crewe Junction. 'And as well as that he was after travelling a good deal : Paris, Vienna, Rome ; the whole blooming shoot ! Oh, he was none of your stick-in-the-muds at all, none of your country yobs, but a jing-bang, up-to-the-minute, Europeanised Young Turk with plus-fours and horn-rimmed specs ! He knew what he wanted ; a fine, big, open town with wide streets and boulevards, big houses, libraries, schools and gardens ; something he could show his butties from Paris.'

My uncle paused and looked away into a corner of the room while the brows darkened over his deep fanatical eyes.

'But there was one class of people in this town,' he went on gravely, 'who didn't like what the Grand

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Vizier was up to. They were a very curious class of people. The like of them didn't exist outside Turkey. Muftis, they were called ; men muftis and women muftis, and they lived in big houses like barracks all round the town. They never did anything for their living only go on pilgrimages to Mecca, and they were never happy only when they were spending millions building big, ugly old mosques or muezzins or whatever the devil they called them. A queer sort of life ! Every evening up on top of their old chimney-stacks with their two arms out chanting " La laha, il Allah."

' So begor, the Grand Vizier had a look at his books and what did he notice, only that for ten years the muftis weren't paying a ha'penny in taxes. The poor people were paying it for them. And there and then he sat down and he sent them a — they have a word for it ! '

' They have,' said Monica, racking her brains.

' A fiat,' said my uncle. ' No, that's not it. A firman ! I have it now. He sent them a firman, and what do you think the muftis said ? They said the Grand Vizier was trying to make the poor people restless, taking their minds off chimney-stacks and giving them notions above their station.'

' Ah, what ould guff you have ! ' Nora shouted from the kitchen. ' Trouble enough I'll have trying to root you out to work in the morning ! '

' Well, one day,' my uncle went on hastily, pretending not to hear, ' one day while the Grand Vizier was sitting in state in his — his what you may call it——'

' Palace,' whispered Josie.

' I forget the Turkish word but that's what it comes to — there was a knock at the door. The young Grand Vizier opens the door himself, and who does he see only the Grand Mufti ; a big, fat, red-faced man with a high fez on him and an umbrella tucked under his arm. Like this ! ' And my uncle raised his nose superciliously

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and held his arm as though he were clutching an umbrella.

'I didn't know they had umbrellas in Turkey,' said Monica suspiciously.

'Now, now, now, now,' shouted my uncle in anguish, shaking his fist at her, 'order please, order ! Of course they had umbrellas. The umbrella was a sacred thing, like the fez. 'Tis distinctly mentioned in all the history books. Rolled up of course, under the arm, just as I say.'

'Ah, this is a queer old story,' Josie said restlessly, her great brown eyes fixed on him in alarm.

'But, God Almighty, when ye won't listen to me ! How the blazes can I tell the story at all if ye keep on interrupting me ? Now I'm after forgetting it all again. Where was I ?'

'In the palace,' Monica replied, a little subdued.

'I remember now.' My uncle bowed his head and fingered his chin. "'Twas when he opened the door and saw the Grand Mufti outside on the landing. There was a big stairs at each side.'

'Like the Town Hall ?' said Monica, who couldn't be repressed.

'Precisely ! Only grander, of course, all gilt and fancy work. A little barbaric but very handsome, very handsome. Well, the Grand Vizier salaamed.' My uncle raised his hands to his temples and bowed his head to his knees in an attitude of abject reverence. '"Salaam, effendi," he says, and he tried to take the umbrella and fez from the Grand Mufti. But the Grand Mufti gave a wicked little grunt and walked in past him with his fez on his pate. . . . Now, the Grand Vizier, as I explained to you, was a Constantinople man, and all Constantinople men have the devil's own temper. You wouldn't know you were after insulting one of them before you got a knife in your ribs ; and in Constantinople to walk into another man's room with your fez on was as much as to say you thought he was no better than a Christian.'

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But the Grand Vizier, being young and inexperienced, thought he'd better wait and see. So he salaamed again. "Grand Mufti," he says, "what can the least of the servants of Allah do for you?" "The least of the servants of Allah," says the Grand Mufti, "will have to stop preaching his subversive doctrines." "Most Excellent" — my uncle joined his hands and bowed his head meekly — "'utterance is obedience,' as the Prophet says." "No more foreign notions!" says the Grand Mufti. "No more infidel Christian ideas!" "My Lord Steeplejack," says the Grand Vizier, "obedience is forgetfulness." "Well, remember it," says the Grand Mufti, "for one word more out of you about taxes, and so help me, Allah, off comes your head."

'Now, I won't swear to the exact words,' my uncle continued excitedly, clawing the air with his hands. 'I heard the story so long ago, and Turkish is a very confusing language. But those were the sentiments — "off comes your head!"'

'Goodness!' cried Josie, so round-eyed with consternation that Monica and I both laughed outright at her. She stared from one to the other of us in confusion and blinked. My uncle smiled and paused to wipe his face in a large handkerchief.

'Well,' he continued, 'this, I needn't say, wasn't the sort of language the young Grand Vizier was accustomed to in Paris. He couldn't take his eyes off the —' He tapped his forehead.

'Fez,' supplied Monica.

'Twas very high; a most remarkable headgear, only worn by the steeplejacks. 'Twas a terrible temptation, but what kept him back was that shocking passage in the Koran about what happens anyone that lays irreverent hands on a mufti's fez. Seven different damnations! But just at that moment the Grand Mufti thumped his umbrella on the floor and said, "Rakaki skulati diniji."

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' What does that mean ? ' asked Josie with a frown.

" Nuff said," explained my uncle. ' And then the Grand Vizier imagined what his pals in Paris would say if they saw him then, taking back-chat from a fat old mufti, and the Constantinople blood boiled in his veins. He opened the door behind him with his left hand and with his right he reached out and took hold of the fez — like this.'

' And threw it out the door,' cried Monica with her ringing laugh.

' Down the full length of the palace stairs and along the hall,' said my uncle eagerly, leaning half across the bed towards her. ' And two out-of-works that were keeping up the palace door, discussing tips for the two-thirty, nearly jumped out of their skins when it landed between them. Imagine it, at their very feet, the sacred fez of a mufti ! But listen now ! Listen to this ! This is good ! The next thing they saw shooting through the air on top of them was the Grand Mufti's umbrella. And then — then what do you think they saw ? '

' The Grand Mufti himself ? ' gasped Josie.

' They saw the Grand Vizier dragging the Grand Mufti, body and bones, by the collar of the coat and the slack of the breeches across the landing. He was too heavy to throw, but the Grand Vizier laid him neatly on the top step and gave him one good push with his boot that sent him rolling down like a barrel. And then the Grand Vizier went in and slammed the door behind him, and even from the hall they could hear him laughing like a madman, to think he was the first Mussulman in history to get hold of a mufti by the slack of the breeches.'

' And did they kill him then ? ' asked Josie eagerly.

' My goodness, can't you let me tell the story my own way ? ' my uncle said irritably. ' They didn't kill him at all ; 'twas out of fashion at the time, but the steeple-jacks tipped the wink to the Caliph, and the Caliph had

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a few words with the Sultan, and the Sultan passed it on to all the provincial Emirs. That's the way things were done in Turkey then. They found it worked grand. Nothing crude, nothing bloodthirsty ; nobody said a cross word ; the thing was never mentioned again, and everyone was all salaams and smiles, but the Grand Vizier knew his goose was cooked.'

My uncle brought out the last phrase with sudden savagery. He drew a deep breath through his nose, then rose and drew the curtains. I saw the sudden match-flare of the lighthouse spurting in the black water.

'Wisha, bad cess to you, you ould show, are you going to be there all night ?' shouted Nora from the foot of the stairs.

'This minute, Nora,' he replied with a laugh.

'And what happened him after ?' asked Monica.

'Who ?' he asked innocently. 'Oh, the Grand Vizier ? He took to drinking raki.'

'Whiskey ?'

'No, raki. The same sort of thing but more powerful. It made him talk too much. He ended up as an old bore.'

'Go on,' said Monica quietly.

'But my goodness,' he protested with his roguish laugh, 'that's all there is. Nothing more. A simple story about a simple fellow. Ah, I didn't tell it right, though. I used to know it better — all the glamour of the East. . . . Well,' he added briskly, 'I'd better let ye get some sleep.'

'That's not all of it,' Monica said in the same quiet way.

'But, my goodness, girl,' he shouted in exasperation, 'when I tell you it is !'

He glared down at her, a tall, raking galoot of a man with his clenched fists held stiffly out.

'Ah, that's a queer old story,' Josie said uneasily.

'You used to have better stories than that.'

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'Tell us the rest of it,' Monica said challengingly.

'I don't even know what you're talking about,' he said in bewilderment. 'What ails you? What more do you want?'

'The Grand Vizier had two daughters,' she cried, kneeling up in the bed, her long bare arm stretched out accusingly.

'I never said he had two daughters,' he snarled.

'But he had!'

'He hadn't.'

'And I tell you he had.'

'You're mixing it up, girl,' he said savagely. 'You're thinking of a different story altogether.'

Then his head went up with a little jerk, he drew a deep breath through his nose and looked at the ceiling. His voice dropped to a whisper and faltered incredulously.

'One moment,' he said as though he were speaking to himself. 'My memory isn't what it was. Maybe you're right. Maybe he had a daughter. 'Pon my soul, Mon, I believe you are. One daughter at any rate. Now what did I hear about her?'

He sank back on the end of the bed and clutched his lean skull in his hands. When he spoke again it was in the same low, faltering voice as though recollecting something he'd heard many years before. I began to shiver all over violently. It was very queer.

'He had a daughter,' he went on, 'and she went to a school where the women muftis were teaching. But that must have been a long time after. She'd only have been a baby when all this occurred. Her father wouldn't tell her, of course. He wouldn't ask for pity. He'd be too proud. And she — 'tis coming back to me! — she was attracted by a young fellow in the town, a shopkeeper's son. She was afraid to ask him to the house because she didn't want him to meet her disreputable old father — a respectable boy like that! The old Grand Vizier saw it

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all but he said nothing. He was too proud. Then the young fellow's father, the tool of the steeplejacks, the old bloodsucker, interfered ; the boy took up with another girl, and the women muftis she was always in and out to told the Grand Vizier's daughter that 'twas only what she might expect on account of her father ; a drunken, blasphemous old man, no better than a Christian. And the Grand Vizier's daughter . . . —my uncle slowly raised his head, joined his hands and looked at the ceiling as though he were snatching the words out of the air—'the Grand Vizier's daughter mooned and cried for weeks on end . . . because she was . . . ashamed of her father.'

'I'm not ashamed,' Monica shouted angrily.

With eyes that seemed to see nothing, my uncle rose and moved towards the door like a man in a trance. For a moment I forgot that he was only an adorable, cranky, unreliable old gasbag of a man who had just been out boozing with Owney Mac in Riordan's disreputable pub on the quays. He looked like a king : a Richard or a Lear. He filled the room, the town, the very night with his presence. Suddenly he drew himself erect, head in air, and his voice rang like thunder through the house.

'God help us,' he said bitterly, 'she was ashamed of her father.'

'They wouldn't say it to me,' Monica shouted hysterically, the tears starting from her eyes. 'I'd tear their eyes out, the smug old bitches !'

My uncle didn't reply but we heard his heavy tread down the stairs to the kitchen. Suddenly Josie sprang clean out of bed and rushed after him. Her great brown eyes were starting from her head with terror. Her face was like the face of a little child left alone in a strange place.

'Daddy, daddy,' she cried, 'I'm not ashamed. Oh, daddy, I'll never do it again ! Daddy, come back to me ! Come back !'

SONG WITHOUT WORDS

EVEN if there were only two men left in the world and both of them to be saints, they wouldn't be happy even then. One of them would be bound to try and improve the other. That is the nature of things.

There were two men one time in the big monastery near our place called Brother Arnold and Brother Michael. In private life Brother Arnold was a postman, but as he had a great name as a cattle doctor they put him in charge of the monastery cows. He had the sort of face you'd expect to see advertising somebody's tobacco ; a big, innocent, good-humoured face with a pair of blue eyes that always had a twinkle in them. Of course, by the rule he was supposed to look sedate and go round in a composed and measured way, but wherever Brother Arnold went his eyes went along with him, to see what devilment would he see on the way, and the eyes would give a twinkle and the hands would slip out of the long white sleeves and he'd be beckoning and doing sign talk on his fingers till further orders.

Now, one day it happened that he was looking for a bottle of castor oil and he suddenly remembered that he'd lent it to Brother Michael in the stables. Brother Michael was a fellow he didn't get on too well with at all ; a dour, silent sort of man that kept himself to himself. He was a man of no great appearance, with a mournful, wizened little face and a pair of weak, red-rimmed eyes — for all the world the sort of man that, if you shaved off his beard, clapped a bowler hat on his head and a fag in his mouth, wouldn't need any other reference to get a job in a stables.

There wasn't any sign of him around the stable yard, but that was only natural because he wouldn't be wanted

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till the other monks came back from the fields, so Brother Arnold banged in the stable door and went to look for the bottle himself. He didn't see the bottle but he saw something else he'd rather not have seen, and that was Brother Michael, hiding in one of the horse-boxes. He was standing against the partition, hoping he wouldn't be noticed, with something hidden behind his back and the look of a little boy that's just been caught at the jam. Something told Brother Arnold he was the most unwelcome man in the world at that minute. He got red and waved his hand by way of showing that he hadn't seen anything and that if he had it was none of his business, and away with him out and back to his own quarters.

It came as a bit of a shock to him. You could see plain enough that the other man was up to something nasty and you could hardly help wondering what it was. It was funny ; he always noticed the same thing when he was in the world ; it was the quiet, sneaky fellows that were always up to mischief. In chapel he looked at Brother Michael and he got the impression that Brother Michael was also looking at him ; a sneaky sort of look to make sure he wouldn't be spotted. Next day again when they met in the yard he caught Brother Michael looking at him, and he gave him back a cold look and nod as much as to say he had him taped.

The day after Brother Michael beckoned him to come over to the stable for a minute, as if there was one of the horses sick. Brother Arnold knew well it wasn't one of the horses, but he went all the same. He was curious to know what explanation he would be offered. Brother Michael closed the door carefully after him and then leaned back against the jamb of the door with his legs crossed and his hands behind his back, a real foxy look. Then he nodded in the direction of the horse-box as much as to say 'Remember the day you saw me in there ?' Brother Arnold nodded. He wasn't likely to

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forget it. So then Brother Michael put his hand up his sleeve and held out a folded newspaper. Brother Arnold grinned as much as to say 'Are you letting on now that that was all you were up to, reading a paper?' but the other man pressed it into his hands. He opened it without any great curiosity, thinking it might be some local paper the man got for the news from home. He glanced at the name of it, and then a light broke on him. His whole face lit up as if you'd switched an electric torch on behind, and at last he burst out laughing. He couldn't help himself. Brother Michael didn't laugh, but he gave a dry little cackle which was as near as he ever got to a laugh. The name of the paper was *The Irish Racing News*. Brother Michael pointed to a heading about the Curragh and then pointed at himself. Brother Arnold shook his head and gave him another look as if he was waiting for another good laugh out of him. Brother Michael scratched his head for something to show what he meant. He was never much good at the sign language. Then he picked up the sweeping brush and straddled it. He pulled up his skirts ; he stretched his left hand out, holding the handle of the brush and began flogging the air behind him, with a grim look on his leathery little puss. And then Brother Arnold nodded and nodded and put up his thumbs to show he understood. He saw now that the reason Brother Michael behaved so queerly was because he read racing papers on the sly, and he read racing papers on the sly because in private life he was a jockey on the Curragh.

He was still laughing away like mad with his blue eyes dancing, and then he remembered all the things he thought about Brother Michael and bowed his head and beat his breast by way of asking pardon. After that he took another look at the paper. A mischievous twinkle came into his eyes and he pointed the paper at himself. Brother Michael pointed back at him, a bit puzzled.

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Brother Arnold chuckled and nodded and stuffed the paper up his own sleeve. Then Brother Michael winked and gave the thumbs-up sign, and in that slow cautious way of his he went down the stable and reached up to the top of the wall where the stable roof sloped down. That was his hiding hole. He took down several more and gave them to Brother Arnold.

For the rest of the day Brother Arnold was in the best of humour. He winked and smiled at everyone round the farm till they were all wondering what the joke was. All that evening and long after he went to his cubicle, he rubbed his hands and giggled with delight every time he thought of it ; it gave him a warm, mellow feeling as if his heart had expanded to embrace all humanity.

It wasn't till next morning that he had a chance of looking at the papers himself. He took them out and spread them on a rough desk under a feeble electric-light bulb high up in the roof. It was four years since last he'd seen a paper of any sort, and then it was only a bit of a local newspaper that one of the carters had brought wrapped about a bit of bread and butter. Brother Arnold had palmed it as neatly as any conjurer ; hidden it away in his desk and studied it as if it was a bit of a lost Greek play. There was nothing on it but a bit of a County Council wrangle about the appointment of seven warble-fly inspectors, but, by the time he was finished with it he knew it by heart. So he didn't just glance at the papers the way a man would in the train to pass the time. He nearly ate them. Blessed bits of words like fragments of tunes coming to him out of a past life ; paddocks and point-to-points and two-year-olds ; and there he was in the middle of a race-course crowd on a spring day, with silver streamers of light floating down the sky like heavenly bunting. He was a handsome fellow in those days. He had only to close his eyes and he could see the refreshment tent again, with the golden

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light leaking like spilt honey through the rents in the canvas, and there was the little girl he used to be sparking, sitting on an upturned lemonade box. ‘Ah, Paddy,’ she said, ‘sure there’s bound to be racing in Heaven !’ She was fast ; too fast for Brother Arnold, who was a quiet-going sort of fellow, and he never got over the shock when he found out that she was running another fellow all the time. But now, all he could remember of her was her smile, and afterwards, whenever his eyes met Brother Michael’s he longed to give him a hearty slap on the back and say ‘Michael, there’s bound to be racing in Heaven,’ and then a grin spread over his big sunny face, and Brother Michael, without once losing that casual, melancholy air, replied with a wall-faced flicker of the horny eyelid ; a tick-tack man’s signal ; a real expressionless, horsy look of complete understanding.

One day Brother Michael came in and took out a couple of papers. On one of them he pointed to the horses he’d marked ; on the other to the horses that came up. He didn’t show any sign of jubilation. He just winked, a leathery sort of a wink, and Brother Arnold gaped as he saw the list of winners. It filled him with wonder to think that where so many clever people lost, a simple little monk, living hundreds of miles away, could foresee it all. The more he thought of it, the more excited he got. He went to the door, reached up his long arm and took down a loose stone from the wall above it. Brother Michael nodded slowly three or four times as much as to say ‘Well, you’re a caution !’ Brother Arnold grinned broadly. He might have been saying ‘That’s nothing.’ Then he took down a bottle and handed it to Brother Michael. The jockey gave him one look ; his face didn’t change, but he took out the cork and sniffed. Still his face never changed. Then all at once he went to the door, gave a quick glance up and a quick glance down and raised the bottle to his mouth.

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The beer was strong ; it made him redden and cough. He cleaned the neck of the bottle with his sleeve before he gave it back. A shudder went through him and his little eyes watered as he watched Brother Arnold's throttle moving on well-oiled hinges. The big man put the bottle back in its hiding-place and beckoned to Brother Michael that he could go there himself whenever he liked. Brother Michael shook his head but Brother Arnold nodded earnestly. His fingers moved like lightning while he explained how a farmer whose cow he had cured left a bottle in the yard for him every week.

Now, Brother Michael's success made Brother Arnold want to try his hand, and whenever Brother Michael gave him a copy of a racing paper with his own selections marked, Brother Arnold gave it back with his, and then they contented themselves as well as they could till the results turned up, three or four days late. It was a new lease of life to the little jockey, for what comfort is it to a man even if he has all the winners when there isn't a soul in the whole world he can tell ? He felt now if only he could have a bob each way on a horse, he'd never ask any more of life. Unfortunately, he hadn't a bob. That put Brother Arnold thinking. He was a resourceful chap, and it was he who invented the dockets, valued for so many Hail Marys. The man who lost had to pay up in prayers for the other man's intention. It was an ingenious scheme and it worked admirably.

At first Brother Arnold had a run of luck. But it wasn't for nothing that the other man had been a jockey. He was too hardy to make a fool of himself, even over a few Hail Marys, and everything he did was carefully planned. Brother Arnold began carefully enough, but the moment he struck it lucky, he began to gamble wildly. Brother Michael had often seen it happen on the Curragh, and he remembered the fate of the men it happened to. Fellows he'd known with big houses and

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cars were now cadging drinks on the streets of Dublin. ‘Aha, my lad,’ he said to himself, thinking of his companion, ‘God was very good to you the day he called you in here where you couldn’t do harm to yourself or those belonged to you.’

Which, by the way, was quite uncalled for, because in the world Brother Arnold’s only weakness was for a drop of stout, and it never did him any harm, but Brother Michael was rather given to a distrust of human nature ; the sort of man who goes looking for a moral in everything, even when there’s no moral in it. He tried to make Brother Arnold take a proper interest in the scientific side of betting, but the man seemed to take it all as a great joke, a flighty sort of fellow. He bet more and more wildly, with that foolish good-natured grin on his face, and after a while Brother Michael found himself being owed the deuce of a lot of prayers. He didn’t like that either. It gave him scruples of conscience and finally turned him against betting in any shape or form. He tried to get Brother Arnold to drop it, but Brother Arnold only looked hurt and a little indignant, like a child you’ve told to stop his game. Brother Michael had that weakness on his conscience too. It suggested that he was getting too attached to Brother Arnold, as in fact he was. He had to admit it. There was something warm and friendly about the man that you couldn’t help liking.

Then one day he went in to Brother Arnold and found him with a pack of cards in his hand. They were a very old pack that had more than served their time in some farmer’s house. They gave Brother Michael a turn, just to look at them. Brother Arnold made the gesture of dealing them out and Brother Michael shook his head. Brother Arnold blushed and bit his lip, but he persisted. All the doubts Brother Michael had been having for weeks turned to conviction. This was the primrose path

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with a vengeance ; one thing leading to another. Brother Arnold grinned and shuffled the deck ; Brother Michael, biding his time, cut for deal and Brother Arnold won. He dealt two hands of five and showed the five of hearts as trump. Just because he was still waiting for a sign, Brother Michael examined his own hand. His face got grimmer. It wasn't the sort of sign he had been expecting, but it was a sign all the same : four hearts all in a bunch ; the ace, the jack, two other trumps and the three of spades. All he had to do was surrender the spade and pick up the five of trumps, and there he was with an unbeatable hand. Was that luck ? Was that coincidence, or was it the Old Boy himself, taking a hand and trying to draw him deeper down into the mud ? He liked to find the moral in things, and the moral in this was as plain as a pikestaff though it went to his heart to admit it. He was a lonesome, melancholy little man and the horses had meant a lot to him in his bad spells. At times it seemed as if they were the only thing that kept him from going clean dotty. How was he going to face maybe twenty or thirty years more of life, never knowing what horses were running or what jocks were up — Derby Day, Punchestown, Leopards-town and the Curragh, all going by and he knowing no more of them than if he was dead ?

‘ O Lord,’ he thought bitterly, ‘ a fellow gives up the whole world for You, his chance of a wife and kids, his home and his family, his friends and his job, and goes off to a bare mountain where he can’t even tell his troubles to the man alongside him ; and still he keeps something back. One little thing to remind him of what he gave up. With me ’twas the horses and with this man ’twas the sup of beer, and I daresay there’s fellows inside that have a bit of a girl’s hair hidden somewhere they can go and look at it now and again. I suppose we all have our little hiding hole, if the truth

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was known, but as small as it is, the whole world is in it, and bit by bit it grows on us again till the day You find us out.'

Brother Arnold was waiting for him to play. He gave a great sigh and put his hand on the desk. Brother Arnold looked at it and then looked at him. Brother Michael idly took away the spade and added the heart, and still Brother Arnold couldn't see. Then Brother Michael shook his head and pointed down through the floor. Brother Arnold bit his lip again as though he were on the point of crying, threw down his own hand and walked away to the other end of the cow-house. Brother Michael left him so for a few moments. He could see the struggle that was going on in the man ; he could almost hear the Old Boy whispering in his ear that he, Brother Michael, was only an old woman (Brother Michael had heard that before) ; that life was long and that a man might as well be dead and buried as not have some little thing to give him an innocent bit of amusement — the sort of plausible whisper that put many a man on the gridiron. He knew that however hard it was now, Brother Arnold would be thankful to him in the next world. 'Brother Michael,' he'd say, 'I don't know what I'd ever have done without the example you gave me.'

Then Brother Michael went up and touched him gently on the shoulder. He pointed to the bottle, the racing paper and the cards in turn. Brother Arnold heaved a terrible sigh but he nodded. They gathered them up between them, the cards and the bottle and the papers, hid them under their habits to avoid all occasion of scandal and went off to confess their crimes to the Prior.

‘ THE STAR THAT BIDS THE SHEPHERD FOLD ’

FATHER WHELAN the parish priest called on his curate, Father Devine, one evening in autumn. He was a tall stout man, broad-chested, with a head that did not detach itself too clearly from the rest of his body, bushes of wild hair in his ears and the rosy, innocent, good-natured face of a pious old country woman who made a living selling eggs. Devine was pale and worn-looking with a gentle, dreamy face that had the soft gleam of an old piano keyboard and wore pince-nez perched on his unhappy, insignificant little nose. He and his P.P. got on very well considering — considering, that is to say, that Devine, who didn’t know when he was well off, had fathered a dramatic society and an annual festival on old Whelan who had to attend them both, and that whenever the curate’s name was mentioned the parish priest, a charitable old man, tapped his forehead and said poor Devine’s poor father was just the same. ‘A national teacher — sure, I knew him well, poor man !’ What Devine said about Whelan in that crucified drawl of his would take longer to tell, because for the most part it consisted of a repetition of the old man’s own words with just the faintest inflection that isolated and underlined their fatuity, so much so that even Devine himself, who didn’t often laugh, broke out into a little thin cackle. Devine was clever ; he was lonely ; he had a few good original water-colours and a bookcase full of works that were a constant source of wonder to Whelan. The old man stood in front of them now with his hat in his hands, lifting his warty old nose while his eyes held a wondering, hopeless, charitable look.

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'Nothing there in your line, I'm afraid,' said Devine with his maddeningly respectful, deprecating air as if he really thought the schoolboy adventure stories which were the only thing his parish priest read were worth his consideration.

'I see you have a lot of foreign books,' said Whelan in a hollow far-away voice. 'I suppose you know the languages well?'

'Well enough to read,' said Devine wearily, his handsome head on one side. 'Why?'

'That foreign boat at the jetties,' said Whelan without looking round. 'What is it? French or German? There's terrible scandal about it.'

'Is that so?' drawled Devine, his dark eyebrows going up his narrow slanting forehead. 'I didn't hear.'

'Oh, terrible,' said Whelan mournfully, turning on him the full battery of his round, rosy old face and shining spectacles. 'There's girls on it every night. Of course there's nothing for us to do only rout them out, and it occurred to me that you'd be handy, speaking the language.'

'I'm afraid my French would hardly rise to that,' Devine said drily, but he didn't like to go further with his refusal, for except for his old-womanly fits of virtue, Whelan was all right as parish priests go. Devine had had sad experience of how they could go. So he put on his faded old coat and clamped his battered hat down over his pince-nez, and the two of them went down the Main Street to the Post Office corner. It was deserted at that hour, except for two out-of-works like ornaments supporting either side of the door, and a few others hanging hypnotised over the bridge while they looked down at the foaming waters of the weir. The tall, fortress-like gable of an old Georgian house beyond the bridge caught all the light.

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'The dear knows,' said Devine with a sigh, 'you'd hardly wonder where they'd go.'

'Ah,' said the old parish priest, holding his head as though it were a flower-pot that might fall and break, 'what do they want to go anywhere for? They're gone mad on pleasure. That girl, Nora Fitzpatrick, is one of them, and her mother at home dying.'

'That might possibly be her reason for going,' said Devine, who knew what the Fitzpatricks' house was like with six children and a mother dying of cancer.

'Ah, sure the girl's place is beside her mother,' said old Whelan without rancour.

They went down past the Technical School to the quays; these too deserted but for a local coal boat and the big foreign grain boat, rising high and dark over the edge of the quay on a full tide. The town was historically reputed to have been a great place—well, about a hundred years ago—and it had masses of grey stone warehouses all staring with lightless eyes across the river. There were two men standing against the wall of the mill, looking up at the grain boat, and as the priests appeared they came to join them on the water's edge. One was a tall gaunt man with a long, sour, melancholy face which looked particularly hideous because it sported a youthful pink-and-white complexion and looked exactly like the face of an old hag heavily made up. He wore a wig and carried a rolled-up umbrella behind his back as though supporting his posterior. His name was Sullivan, the manager of a shop in town, and a man Devine hated. The other was a small, fat, Jewish-looking man with dark skin and hair and an excitable manner. His name was Sheridan. As they met by the boat, Devine looked up and saw two young foreign faces propped on their hands peering at him over the edge of the boat.

'Well, boys?' asked old Whelan.

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'There's two of them on it at present, father,' said Sullivan in a shrill, scolding voice. 'Nora Fitzpatrick and Phillie O'Malley.'

'Well, better go aboard and tell them come off,' said Whelan tranquilly.

'I wonder what our legal position is, father?' said Sheridan, scowling at Whelan and Devine. 'Have we any sort of *locus standi*?'

'Oh, in the event of your being stabbed I think the fellow could be tried,' said Devine with bland malice. 'I don't know of course whether your wife and children could claim compensation.'

The malice was lost on the parish priest, who laid one hairy paw on Devine's shoulder and the other on Sheridan's to calm their fears. He exuded a feeling of pious confidence.

'Don't worry your heads about the legal position,' he said paternally. 'I'll be answerable for that.'

'Good enough, father,' said Sheridan with a grim air, and pulling his hat over his eyes and putting his hands behind his back he strode up the gangway while Sullivan, clutching his umbrella against the small of his back, followed him. They went up to the two young sailors.

'Two girls,' said Sullivan in his high-pitched scolding voice. 'We're looking for two girls that came aboard about a half an hour ago.'

Neither of the sailors stirred. One of them turned his eyes lazily and looked Sullivan up and down.

'Not this boat,' he said impudently. 'That boat down there. Always girls on that.'

Then Sheridan, who had glanced downstairs through an open doorway, saw something below.

'Phillie O'Malley,' he shouted in a raucous voice with one arm pointing towards the quay, 'Father Whelan and Father Devine are here. They want a word with you.'

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'Tell her if she doesn't come at once I'll go and bring her off,' shouted Father Whelan anxiously.

'He says if you don't come he'll damn soon make you,' shouted Sheridan.

Nothing happened for a moment or two. Then a tall girl with a consumptive face came to the top of the gangway with a handkerchief pressed to her eyes. Devine couldn't help a sudden pang of misery at the sight of her wretched finery, her cheap hat and bead necklace. He was angry and ashamed, and a cold fury of sarcasm rose up in him.

'Come on, lads,' said the parish priest encouragingly.
'Where's the second one?'

Sheridan, flushed with triumph, was just about to disappear downstairs when one of the sailors turned and flung him aside. Then he stood nonchalantly in the doorway, blocking the way. The parish priest's face grew flushed and he only waited for the girl to leave the gangway before he went up himself. Devine paused to catch her hand and whisper a few words of comfort into her ear before he followed. It was a ridiculous scene : the sailor blocking the door ; Sheridan blowing himself up till his dark Jewish face turned purple ; the fat old parish priest with his head in the air, trembling with senile anger and astonishment.

'Get out of the way at once,' he said.

'Don't be a fool, man,' Devine said with quiet ferocity. 'If you got a knife in your ribs, it would be your own doing. You don't want to quarrel with these lads. You'll have to talk to the captain.' And then, bending forward with his eyebrows raised and his humble, deprecating manner he asked, 'I wonder if you'd mind showing us the way to the captain's cabin ?'

The sailor who was blocking the way looked at him for a moment and then nodded in the direction of the upper deck. Taking his parish priest's arm and telling

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Sullivan and Sheridan not to follow them, Devine went up the ship. When they had gone a little way the second young sailor passed them out, knocked at a door and said something which Devine couldn't catch. Then, with a scowl, he held the door open for them to go in. The captain was a middle-aged man with a heavily lined sallow face, close-cropped black hair and a black moustache. There was something Mediterranean about his air.

'*Bonsoir, messieurs*,' he said in a loud business-like tone.

'*Bonsoir, monsieur le capitaine*,' said Devine with the same plaintive, ingratiating manner as he bowed his head and raised his battered old hat. '*Est-ce que nous vous dérangeons ?*'

'*Mais pas du tout ; entrez, je vous prie*,' the captain said heartily, obviously relieved by the innocuousness of Devine's manner. '*Vous parlez français alors ?*'

'*Un peu, monsieur le capitaine*,' Devine said deprecatingly. '*Vous savez, ici en Irlande on n'a pas souvent l'occasion*.'

'Ah, well,' said the captain, 'I speak a little English too, so we will understand one another. Won't you sit down ?'

'I wish my French were anything like as good as your English,' said Devine as he took a chair.

'You'll have a drink with me,' said the captain, expanding to the flattery of words and tone. 'Some brandy, eh ?'

'I'd be delighted, of course,' said Devine regretfully, 'but I'm afraid I've a favour to ask of you first.'

'Certainly, certainly,' agreed the captain enthusiastically. 'Anything you like. Have a cigar ?'

'Never smoke them,' said old Whelan in a dull stubborn voice, looking at the cigar-case and then looking away ; and to mask his rudeness Devine, who never smoked them either, took one and lit it.

'Perhaps I'd better explain who we are,' he said,

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sitting back, his head on one side, his long delicate hands hanging over the arm of the chair. 'This is Father Whelan who is the parish priest of the town. My name is Devine and I'm the curate.'

'And my name,' said the captain proudly, 'is Platon Demarrais. I bet you never heard before of a fellow called Platon?'

'I can't say I did,' said Devine mildly. 'Any relation to the philosopher?'

'The very man!' exclaimed the captain, holding up his cigar. 'And I have two brothers, Zenon and Plotin.'

'Really?' exclaimed Devine. 'What an intellectual family you are!'

'My father was a school teacher,' said the captain. 'He called us that to annoy the priest. He was anti-clerical.'

'That's scarcely peculiar to teachers in France,' said Devine drily. 'My own father was a school teacher, but I'm afraid he never got to the point of calling me Plato. . . . But about this business of ours. There's a girl called Nora Fitzpatrick on the ship, fooling with the sailors, I suppose. She's one of Father Whelan's parishioners and we'd be very grateful if you could see your way to have her put off.'

'Speak for yourself, father,' said Whelan, raising his stubborn old peasant's head and quelling fraternisation with a glance. 'I don't see why I should be grateful to any man for doing what 'tis his moral duty to do.'

'Then perhaps you'd better explain your errand yourself, Father Whelan,' said Devine with an abnegation not far removed from waspishness.

'I think so, Father Devine,' said Whelan stubbornly. 'That girl, Captain Whatever-your-name-is,' he went on in a slow voice, 'has no business to be on your ship at all. It is no place for a young unmarried girl to be at this hour of night.'

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'I don't understand,' said the captain uneasily, looking at Devine. 'Is this girl a relative of yours?'

'No, sir,' said Whelan. 'She is nothing whatever to me.'

'Then I don't see what you want her for,' said the captain.

'That's as I'd expect, sir,' said Whelan stolidly, studying his nails.

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' exclaimed Devine, exasperated by the old man's boorishness. 'You see, captain,' he said patiently, bending forward with his worried air, his head tilted back as though he feared the pince-nez might fall off, 'this girl, as I said, is one of Father Whelan's parishioners. She's not a very good girl — not that I mean there's any harm in her,' he added hastily, 'but she is a bit wild, and it's Father Whelan's duty to keep her as far as he can removed from temptation. He is the shepherd and she is one of his stray sheep,' he added with a faint smile at his own eloquence.

The captain bent forward and touched Devine lightly on the knee.

'You are a funny race,' he said. 'I have travelled the whole world. I have met Englishmen everywhere, but I will never understand you. Never!'

'But we're not English, man,' said old Whelan with the first sign of interest he had so far displayed. 'Don't you know what country you're in? This is Ireland.'

'Ah,' said the captain with a shrug, 'it is the same thing.'

'Oh, but surely, captain,' protested Devine gently with his head cocked, sizing up his man, 'surely we admit some distinction?'

'No, no,' said the captain vigorously, shaking his head.

'At the Battle of the Boyne you fought for us,' said Devine persuasively. 'We fought for you at Fontenoy and Ramillies.'

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*When on Ramillies bloody field
The baffled French were forced to yield,
The victor Saxon backward reeled
Before the charge of Clare’s Dragoons.’*

He recited the lines with the same apologetic smile he had adopted in speaking of sheep and shepherds, as if to excuse his momentary lapse into literature, but the captain waved him aside impatiently.

‘No, no, no, no, no,’ he said with a shrug and a groan. ‘I know all that. You call yourselves Irish and the others call themselves Scotch, but there is no difference. You all speak English ; you all behave like English ; you all pretend to be very good boys. You don’t do nothing, eh ? You do not come to me as man to man and say, “The curé’s daughter is on the ship. Send her home.” Why ?’

‘Perhaps,’ suggested Devine sarcastically, ‘because she doesn’t happen to be the curé’s daughter.’

‘Whose daughter ?’ asked Whelan with his mouth hanging.

‘Yours,’ said Devine drily.

‘Well, well, well,’ the old man said in real distress. ‘What sort of upbringing had he at all ? Does he even know we can’t get married ?’

‘I should say he takes it for granted,’ replied Devine over his shoulder even more drily than before. ‘*Elle n’est pas sa fille*,’ he added to the captain.

‘*C’est sûr* ?’ asked the captain suspiciously.

‘*C’est certain*,’ said Devine with a nod.

‘*Sa maîtresse alors* ?’ said the captain.

‘*Ni cela non plus*,’ replied Devine evenly, with only the faintest of smiles on the worn shell of his face.

‘Ah, bon, bon, bon,’ said the captain excitedly, springing from his seat and striding about the cabin, scowling and waving his arms. ‘*Bon. C’est bon. Vous vous moquez de moi, monsieur le curé. Comprenez-vous, l’est seulement par politesse*

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que j'ai voulu faire croire que c'était sa fille. On voit bien que le vieux est jaloux. Est-ce que je n'ai pas vu les flots qui surveillent mon bateau toute la semaine ? Mais croyez-moi, monsieur, je me fiche de lui et de ses agents.

'He seems to be very excited,' said Whelan with distaste. 'What's he saying ?'

'I'm trying to persuade him that she isn't your mistress,' Devine couldn't refrain from saying with quiet malice. 'He says you're jealous and that you've had spies watching his ship for a week.'

'Well, well, well,' Father Whelan cried, colouring up like a girl and trembling with the indignity that had been put on him. 'We'd better go home, Devine. 'Tis no use talking to a man like that. It's clear that he's mad.'

'He probably thinks the same of us,' said Devine, rising. '*Venez manger demain soir et je vous expliquerai tout*,' he added to the captain.

'*Je vous remercie, monsieur*,' said the captain with a shrug which Devine knew he could never equal; '*c'est très aimable de votre part, mais je n'ai pas besoin d'explications. Il n'y a rien d'inattendu, mais*' with a smile, '*vous en faites toute une histoire.*' He clapped his hand jovially on Devine's shoulder and almost embraced him. '*Naturellement, je vous rends la fille, parce que vous la demandez, mais comprenez bien que je le fais à cause de vous, et non pas*' — he drew himself up to his full height and glared at old Whelan who stood there in a dumb stupor — '*à cause de monsieur et de ses agents.*'

'*Oh, quant à moi,*' said Devine with weary humour, '*vous feriez mieux en l'emmenant où vous allez. Et moi-même aussi.*'

'*Quoi ?*' shouted the captain in desperation, clutching his forehead. '*Vous l'aimez aussi ?*'

'*Non, non, non,*' said Devine good-humouredly, patting him consolingly on the arm. 'It's all very complicated. I really wouldn't try to understand it if I were you.'

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'What's he saying now?' asked Whelan with sour suspicion.

'Oh, he thinks she's my mistress as well,' said Devine pleasantly. 'He thinks we're sharing her so far as I can gather.'

'Come on, come on,' said Whelan in dull despair, making for the gangway. 'My goodness, even I never thought they were as bad as that. And we sending missions to the blacks!'

Meanwhile the captain had rushed aft and shouted down the stairway. The girl appeared, small, plump and weeping too, and the captain, quite moved, slapped her encouragingly on the shoulder and said something to her in a gruff voice which Devine suspected was in the nature of advice about choosing younger lovers for the future. Then the captain went up bristling to Sullivan who was standing by the gangway, leaning on his folded umbrella, and with fluttering hands and imperious nods ordered him off the vessel.

'*Allez-vous-en*,' he said curtly, '*allez, allez, allez!*'

Sullivan went and Sheridan followed. Dusk had crept suddenly along the quays and lay heaped there the colour of blown sand. Over the bright river mouth, shining under a bank of dark cloud, a star twinkled. Devine felt hopeless and lost, as though he were returning to the prison-house of his youth. The parish priest preceded him down the gangway with his old woman's dull face sunk in his broad chest. At the foot he stopped and stood with his hands still clutching the gangway rail and gazed back up at the captain, who was scowling fiercely at him over the edge of the ship.

'Anyway,' he said heavily, 'thanks be to the Almighty God that your accursed race is withering off the face of the earth.'

Devine with a bitter little smile raised his battered old hat and pulled the skirts of his old coat about him

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as he stepped up on to the gangway.

'*Vous viendrez demain, monsieur le capitaine ?*' he said in his gentlest, most ingratiating tone.

'*Avec plaisir. A demain, monsieur le berger,*' replied the captain with a knowing look.

THE LONG ROAD TO UMMERA

*Stay for me there. I will not fail
To meet thee in that hollow vale.*

ALWAYS in the evenings you saw her shuffle up the road to Miss O.'s for her little jug of porter, a shapeless lump of an old woman in a plaid shawl faded to the colour of snuff that dragged her head down on to her bosom where she clutched its folds in one hand, a canvas apron and a pair of men's boots without laces. Her eyes were puffy and screwed up in tight little buds of flesh and her rosy old face, that might have been carved out of a turnip, was all crumpled with blindness. The old heart was failing her, and several times she would have to rest, put down the jug, lean against the wall, and lift the weight of the shawl off her head. People passed : she stared at them humbly : they saluted her : she turned her head and peered after them for minutes on end. The rhythm of life had slowed down in her till you could scarcely detect its faint and sluggish beat. Sometimes from some queer instinct of shyness, she turned to the wall, took a snuff-box from her bosom and shook out a pinch on the back of her swollen hand. When she sniffed it, it smeared her nose and upper lip and spilled all over her old black blouse. She raised the hand to her eyes and looked at it closely and reproachfully as though astonished that it no longer served her properly. Then she dusted herself, picked up the old jug again, scratched herself against her clothes and shuffled along close by the wall, groaning aloud.

When she reached her own house, which was a little cottage in a terrace, she took off her boots, and herself and the old cobbler who lodged with her turned out a

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pot of potatoes on the table, stripping them with their fingers and dipping them in the little mound of salt while they took turn and turn about with the porter jug. He was a lively and philosophic old man called Johnny Thornton.

After their supper they sat in the firelight, talking about old times in the country and long-dead neighbours, ghosts, fairies, spells and charms. It always depressed her son, finding them together like that when he called with her monthly allowance. He was a well-to-do business man with a little grocery shop in the South Main Street and a little house in Sunday's Well, and nothing would have pleased him better than that his old mother should share all the grandeur with him : the carpets and the chaney and the chiming clocks. He sat moodily between them, stroking his long jaw, and wondering why they talked so much about death, in the old-fashioned way, as if it was something that made no difference at all.

‘Wisha, what pleasure do ye get out of old talk like that?’ he asked one night.

‘Like what, Pat?’ his mother asked with her timid smile.

‘My goodness,’ he said, ‘ye’re always at it. Corpses and graves and people that are dead and gone.’

‘Arrah, why wouldn’t we?’ she replied, looking down stiffly as she tried to button the open-necked blouse that revealed her old breast. ‘Isn’t there more of us there than here?’

‘Much difference ’twill make to you when you won’t know them or see them!’ he exclaimed.

‘Oye, why wouldn’t I know them?’ she cried angrily. ‘Is it the Twomeys of Lackaroe and the Driscolls of Ummera?’

‘How sure you are we’ll take you to Ummera!’ he said mockingly.

‘Och, aye, Pat,’ she asked, shaking herself against her

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clothes with her humble, stupid, wondering smile, ‘and where else would you take me?’

‘Isn’t our own plot good enough for you?’ he asked.

‘Your own son and your grandchildren?’

‘Musha, indeed, is it in the town you want to bury me?’ She shrugged herself and blinked into the fire, her face growing sour and obstinate. ‘I’ll go back to Ummera, the place I came from.’

‘Back to the hunger and misery,’ Pat said sourly.

‘Back to your father, boy.’

‘Aye, to be sure, where else?’ he said scornfully.

‘But my father or my grandfather never did for you what I did. Often and often I scoured the streets of Cork for a few ha’pence for you.’

‘You did, amossa, you did, you did,’ she agreed, looking into the fire and shaking herself; ‘you were a good son to me.’

‘And often I did it,’ said Pat, full of self-pity, ‘and the belly falling out of me with hunger.’

‘ ‘Tis true for you,’ she mumbled, ‘ ‘tis, ‘tis, ‘tis true. ’Twas often and often you had to go without it. What else could you do and the way we were left?’

‘And now our grave isn’t good enough for you,’ he complained. There was bitterness in his tone. He was an insignificant little man and jealous of the power the dead had over her.

She looked at him with the same abject, half-imbecile smile, the wrinkled old eyes almost shut above the Mongolian cheek-bones, while with a swollen old hand like a pot-stick, it had so little life in it, she smoothed a few locks of yellow-white hair across her temples — a trick she had when troubled.

‘Musha, take me back to Ummera, Pat,’ she whined.

‘Take me back to my own. I’d never rest among strangers. I’d be rising and drifting.’

‘Ah, foolishness, woman!’ he said with an indignant

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look. ‘That sort of thing is gone out of fashion.’

‘I won’t stop here for you,’ she shouted hoarsely, in sudden impotent fury, and she rose and grasped the mantelpiece for support.

‘You won’t be asked,’ he said shortly.

‘I’ll haunt you,’ she whispered tensely, holding on to the mantelpiece and bending down over him with a horrible grin.

‘And that’s only more of the foolishness,’ he said with a nod. ‘Haunts and fairies and spells.’

She took one step towards him and stood, plastering down the two little locks of yellowing hair, the half-dead eyes twitching and blinking in the candlelight, and the swollen crumpled face with the cheeks like cracked enamel.

‘Pat,’ she said, ‘the day we left Ummera you promised to bring me back. You were only a little gorsoon that time. The neighbours gathered round me, and the last word I said to them and I going down the road was, “Neighbours, my son, Pat, is after giving me his word, and he’ll bring me back to ye when my time comes.”’

. . . That’s as true as the Almighty God is over me this night. I have everything ready.’ She went to the shelf under the stairs and took out two parcels. She seemed to be speaking to herself as she opened them gloatingly, bending down her head in the feeble light of the candle. ‘There’s the two brass candlesticks and the blessed candles alongside them. And there’s my shroud, aired regular on the line.’

‘Ah, you’re mad, woman,’ he said angrily. ‘Forty miles ! Forty miles into the heart of the mountains !’

She suddenly shuffled towards him on her bare feet, her hand upraised, clawing the air, her body like her face blind with age. Her harsh, croaking old voice rose to a shout.

‘I brought you from it, boy, and you must bring me back. If ’twas the last shilling you had, and you and

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your children to go to the poorhouse after, you must bring me back to Ummera. And not by the short road either ! Mind what I say now ! The long road ! The long road to Ummera round the lake, the way I brought you from it. I lay a heavy curse on you this night if you bring me the short road over the hill. And ye must stop by the ash tree at the foot of the boreen where ye can see my little house and say a prayer for all that were ever old in it and all that played on the floor. And then — Pat ! Pat Driscoll ! Are you listening ? Are you listening to me, I say ?'

She shook him by the shoulder, peering down into his long miserable face to see how was he taking it.

'I'm listening,' he said with a shrug of his shoulders.

'Then' — her voice dropped to a whisper — 'you must stand up overright all the neighbours and say — remember now what I'm telling you ! " Neighbours, this is Abby, Batty Heige's daughter, that kept her promise to ye at the end of all."'

She said it lovingly, smiling to herself, as if it were a bit of an old song, something she went over and over in the long nights. All West Cork was in it : the bleak road over the moors to Ummera, the smooth grey pelts of the hills with the long spider's-web of the fences ridging them, drawing the scarecrow fields awry, and the whitewashed cottages, poker-faced between their little scraps of holly bushes looking this way and that out of the wind.

'Well, I'll make a fair bargain with you,' said Pat as he got up. Without seeming to listen, she screwed up her eyes and studied his weak, melancholy face. 'This house is a great expense to me. Do what I'm always asking you. Live with me and I'll promise I'll take you back to Ummera.'

'Oye, I will not,' she replied sullenly, shrugging her shoulders helplessly, an old sack of a woman with all the life gone out of her.

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'All right,' said Pat. "'Tis your own choice. That's my last word, take it or leave it. Live with me and Ummera for your grave, or stop here, and a plot in the Botanics.'

She watched him out the door with her shoulders hunched about her ears. Then she shrugged herself, took out her snuff-box and took a pinch.

'Arrah, I wouldn't mind what he'd say,' said Johnny. 'A fellow like that would change his mind tomorrow.'

'He might and he mightn't,' she said heavily, and opened the back door to go out to the yard. It was a starry night, and they could hear the noise of the city below them in the valley. She raised her eyes to the bright sky over the back wall and suddenly broke into a cry of loneliness and helplessness.

'Oh, oh, oh,' she groaned, "'tis far away from me Ummera is tonight above any other night, and I'll die and be buried here, far from all I ever knew and the long roads between us.'

Of course old Johnny should have known damn well what she was up to the night she made her way down to the cross, creeping along beside the railings. By the blank wall opposite the lighted pub, Dan Regan the jarvey in his bowler hat and black oilskin coat was standing beside his old box of a covered car with his pipe in his gob. He was the jarvey all the old neighbours went to. Abby beckoned to him, and he followed her into the shadow of a gateway overhung by ivy. He listened gravely to what she had to tell him, sniffing and nodding, wiping his nose in his sleeve or crossing the pavement to hawk his nose and spit in the channel, while his face with its drooping moustaches never relaxed its discreet and doleful expression.

Johnny should have known what that meant and why old Abby who was always so open-handed sat before an empty grate sooner than light a fire and came after him

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on Fridays for the rent, whether he had it or not, and even begrimed the little drop of porter that had always been give and take between them. He knew himself it was a change before death, and it all went into the wallet in her bosom, and at night in her attic she counted it by the light of her candle, and when the coins dropped from her lifeless fingers, he heard her roaring like an old cow as she crawled along the naked boards, sweeping them blindly with her palms. Then he heard the bed creak as she tossed about in it, and the rosary being taken from the bed-head, and the old voice rising and falling in prayer ; and sometimes when a high wind blowing up the river roused him before dawn he could hear her muttering : a mutter, and then a yawn ; the scrape of a match as she peered at the alarm clock — the endless nights of the old — and then the mutter of prayer again.

But Johnny in some ways was very stupid, and he guessed nothing till the night she called him, and going to the foot of the stairs with a candle in his hand, saw her on the landing in her flour-bag shift, one hand clutching the jamb of the door while the other clawed wildly at her few straggly hairs.

‘ Johnny,’ she screeched down at him, beside herself with excitement, ‘ he was here ! ’

‘ Who was there ? ’ he snarled back, still cross with sleep.

‘ Michael Driscoll, Pat’s father.’

‘ Ah, you were dreaming, woman,’ he said in disgust.

‘ Go back to your bed, in God’s Holy Name.’

‘ I was not dreaming,’ she cried. ‘ I was lying broad awake, saying my beads, when he come in the door, beckoning to me. Go down to Dan Regan’s for me, Johnny.’

‘ I will not, indeed, go down to Dan Regan’s for you,’ Johnny snarled. ‘ Do you know what hour of night it is ? ’

‘ Tis morning.’

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‘Four o’clock !’ he shouted. ‘What a thing I’d do ! . . . Is it the way you’re feeling bad ?’ he added more gently as he mounted the stairs to her. ‘Do you want him to take you to hospital ?’

‘Oye, I’m going to no hospital,’ she replied sullenly, turning her back on him and thumping into the room again. She opened an old chest of drawers and began fumbling in it for her best clothes, her bonnet and cloak.

‘Then what the blazes do you want Dan Regan for ?’ he cried in exasperation.

‘What matter to you what I want him for ?’ she replied with senile suspicion. ‘I have a journey to go, never you mind where.’

‘Ach, you ould oinseach, your mind is wandering,’ he said. ‘There’s the devil of a wind blowing up the river. The whole house is shaking. That’s what you heard. Make your mind easy now and go back to bed.’

‘My mind is not wandering,’ she shouted. ‘Thanks be to the Almighty God I have my senses as good as you. My plans are made. I’m going back now where I came from. Back to Ummera.’

‘Back to where ?’ Johnny asked in stupefaction.

‘Back to Ummera.’

‘You’re madder than I thought,’ he said. ‘And do you think or imagine Dan Regan will drive you ?’

‘He will drive me, then,’ she said, shrugging herself as she held an old petticoat up to the light. ‘He’s booked for it any hour of the day or night.’

‘Then Dan Regan is madder still,’ he said furiously.

‘Leave me alone now,’ she muttered stubbornly, blinking and shrugging. ‘I’m going back to Ummera, and that was why my old comrade came for me. All night and every night I have my beads wore out, praying the Almighty God and His Blessed Mother not to leave me die among strangers. And now I’ll leave my old bones on a high hill-top in Ummera.’

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Johnny was easily pacified. It promised to be a fine day's outing and a story that would quieten a pub, so he made the tea for her, and after that went down to Dan Regan's little cottage, and before smoke showed from any chimney on the road they were away. Johnny was hopping about the car in his excitement, leaning out, shouting through the back of the car to Dan and identifying big estates he hadn't seen for years. When they were well outside the town, himself and Dan went in for a drink. While they were inside the old woman dozed. Dan Regan roused her again to ask if she wouldn't take a drop of something, and at first she didn't know who he was, and then she asked where they were and peered out at the pub and the old dog sprawled asleep in the sunlight before the door. But when next they halted she had fallen asleep again, her mouth hanging open and her breath coming in noisy gusts. Dan's face grew gloomier.

'Tis all right,' said Johnny hastily. 'She's only tired.'

'I dunno,' said Dan. He looked hard at her and spat. Then he took a few turns about the road, lit his pipe, put on the lid. 'I don't like her looks at all, Johnny,' he said gravely. 'I done wrong. I see that now. I done wrong.'

After that, every couple of miles he halted to see how she was, and Johnny, threatened with the loss of his treat, shook her and shouted at her. Each time Dan's face grew graver. He walked gloomily about the road, clearing his nose and spitting in the ditch. 'God direct me,' he said solemnly. "'Twon't be wishing to me. Her son is a powerful man. He'll break me yet. A man should never interfere between families. Blood is thicker than water. The Regans were always unlucky.'

When they reached the first town he drove straight to the police barrack and told them the story.

'Ye can tell the judge I gave ye every assistance,' he

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said in a reasonable, broken-hearted tone. ‘I was always a friend of the law. I’ll keep nothing back — a pound was the price agreed. I suppose if she dies ’twill be manslaughter. I never had hand, act or part in politics. Sergeant Daly at the Cross knows me well.’

So when Abby came to herself she was in a bed in the hospital. She began to fumble for her wallet and her parcels, and her shrieks soon brought a crowd of unfortunate old women about her.

‘Whisht, whisht, whisht,’ they said. ‘They’re all in safe keeping. You’ll get them back.’

‘I want them now,’ she shouted, struggling to get out of bed while they held her down. ‘Leave me go, ye robbers of hell ! Ye night-walking rogues, leave me go ! Oh, murder, murder ! Ye’re killing me.’

At last an old Irish-speaking priest from the town came in and comforted her. He left her quietly saying her beads, secure in his promise to see that she was buried in Ummera whatever her son might say. As darkness fell, the beads dropped from her swollen old hands and she began to mutter to herself in Irish. Sitting about the fire, the ragged old women whispered and groaned in sympathy. The Angelus rang out from a near-by church. Suddenly Abby’s voice rose to a shout and she tried to lift herself on her elbow in the bed.

‘Ah, Michael Driscoll, my friend, my kind comrade, you didn’t forget me after all the long years. I’m a long time away from you but I’m coming at last. They tried to keep me away from you, to make me stop among foreigners in the town, but where would I be at all without you and all the old friends ? Stay for me, my treasure. Stop and show me the way. . . . Neighbours,’ she shouted, pointing into the shadows with her finger, ‘that man there is my own husband, Michael Driscoll. Let ye see he won’t leave me to find my way alone. Gather round me with yeer lanterns, neighbours, till I

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see who I have. I know ye all ; 'tis only the sight is weak on me. Be easy, now, my brightness, my own kind, loving comrade. I'm coming. After all the long years I'm on the road to you at last. . . .'

It was a spring day, full of wandering sunlight, when they brought her the long road to Ummera, the way she had come from it forty years before. The lake was like a dazzle of midges ; the shafts of the sun, revolving like a great mill-wheel, poured their cascades of milky sunlight over the hills and the little whitewashed cottages, and the little black mountain cattle among the scarecrow fields. The hearse stopped at the foot of the lane that led to the roofless cabin, just as she had pictured it to herself in the long nights, and Pat, looking more melancholy than ever, turned to the waiting neighbours and said :

' Neighbours, this is Abby, Batty Heige's daughter, that kept her promise to ye at the end of all.'

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I

HE used to sit all day long looking out from behind the dirty little window of his dirty little shop in Main Street ; a man with a smooth oval pate and bleared, melancholy-looking, unblinking eyes ; a hanging lip with a fag dangling from it and hanging, unshaven chins. It was a face you'd remember, swollen, ponderous, crimson, with a frame of jet-black hair plastered down at either side with bear's grease ; and though the hair grew grey and the face turned yellow, it seemed to make no difference : because he never changed his position you didn't notice the change that came over him from within, and saw him at the end as you saw him first, planted there like an oak or rock. He scarcely stirred even when someone pushed in the old glazed door and stumbled down the steps from the street. The effort seemed too much for him ; the bleary, bloodshot eyes would travel slowly towards some shelf, the arm would reach out lifelessly, the coins drop in the till. Then he shrugged himself and gazed out into the street again. Sometimes he spoke, and it always gave you a shock for it was as if the statue of O'Connell got down off the pedestal and enquired in a melancholy bass voice and with old-fashioned politeness for some member of your family. It was a thing held greatly in his favour that he never forgot an old neighbour.

Sometimes the children tormented him, looking in and making faces at him through the glass, so that they distracted him from the people passing by, and then he roared at them without stirring. Sometimes they went too far and his face swelled and grew purple ; he staggered to the door and bellowed after them in a powerful,

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resonant voice that echoed to the other end of the town. But mostly he stayed there silent and undisturbed, and the dirt and disorder around him grew and greased his hair and clothes, and his face and chin with their Buddha-like gravity were shiny with spilt gravy. His only luxury was the Woodbine which went out even between his lips. The cigarettes were on the shelf behind him and all he had to do was reach out his hand without even turning his head.

He was the last of a very good family, the Devereuxs, who had once been big merchants in the town. People remembered his old da driving into town in his own carriage ; indeed, they remembered Tom Devereux himself as a bit of a masher, smoking a cigar and wearing a new flower in his buttonhole every day. But then he married beneath him and the match turned out badly. There was a daughter but she turned out badly too, started a child and went away God knows where, and now he had nobody to look after him only an old sweat called Faxy : a tall, stringy, ravaged-looking man, toothless and half mad. He had attached himself to Devereux years before as a batman. He boiled the kettle and brought the old man a cup of tea in the morning.

‘ Orders for the day, general ? ’ he’d say, springing to the salute, and Devereux, after a lot of groaning, would fish out sixpence from under the pillow.

‘ And what the hell do you think I’m going to get for that ? ’ Faxy would snarl with the smile withering off his puss.

‘ Oh, indeed,’ Devereux would bellow complacently, ‘ you can get a very nice bit of black pudding for that.’

‘ And is it black pudding you’re going to drink instead of tay ? ’

‘ I have no more,’ the old man would say, turning purple.

‘ You haven’t, I hear,’ Faxy would hiss with a wolfish

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grin, stepping from one foot to another. ‘Come on now. My time is valuable. Baksheesh ! Baksheesh for the sahib’s tiffin !’

‘I tell you go away and don’t be annoying me,’ Devereux would shout, and that was all the satisfaction Faxy got.

‘But he have it, man, he have it,’ he would hiss, leaning over the counters, trying to coax credit out of the shopkeepers. ‘Boxes of it he have, man, nailed down and flowing over ! He have two big trunks of it under the bed alone.’

That was the report in town as well : everyone knew the Devereuxs always had the tin and that old Tom hadn’t lightened it much, and at one time or another every shopkeeper gave him credit, and they all ended by refusing it, seeing the old man in the window day after day, looking as if he was immortal.

2

At long last he did get a stroke and had to take to his bed, upstairs in a stinking room with the sagging window-frames padded and nailed against the draughts from Main Street and the flowery wallpaper, layer on layer of it, hanging in bangles from the walls, while Faxy looked after the shop and made hay with the Woodbines and whatever else came handy. Not that there was much, only paraffin oil and candles and maybe a few old things like castor oil on cards that the commercials left on spec. Whenever a customer went out, bang, bang, bang, the old man thumped on the floor for Faxy.

‘Who was that went out, Faxy?’ he’d groan. ‘I didn’t recognise the voice.’

‘That was the Sheehan girl from the lane.’

‘Did you ask her how her father was ?’

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'I did not, indeed, ask her how her father was. I have something else to think about.'

'You ought to have asked her,' the old man grumbled.
'What was it she wanted?'

'A couple of candles,' hissed Faxy. 'Tuppence-worth! Is there anything else you'd like to know?'

'Twas not tuppence-worth, Donnell. Don't try and deceive me. I heard every word of it. I distinctly heard her asking for something else as well.'

'A pity the stroke affected your hearing,' snarled Faxy.

'Don't you try and deceive me,' boomed Devereux.
'I have it all checked, Donnell, every ha'porth. Mind what I'm saying.'

Then one morning while Faxy was smoking a fag and looking at the racing on yesterday's paper, the door opened and in came Father Ring. Father Ring was a plausible little Kerryman with a sand-coloured puss and a shock of red hair. He was always very deprecating, with an excuse-me air, and he came in sideways, on tiptoe, with a shocked expression — it is only Kerrymen who can do things like that.

'My poor man,' he whispered, leaning across the counter to Faxy, 'I'm sorry for your trouble. Himself isn't well on you.'

'If he isn't,' snarled Faxy, looking as much like the Stag at Bay as made no difference, 'he's well looked after.'

'I know that, Faxy,' said the priest, nodding. 'I know that well, but still 'twould be no harm if I had a few words with him. A man like that might go in a flash. . . . Tell me, Faxy,' he whispered with his hand across his lips and his head on one side, 'are his affairs in order, do you know?'

'How the hell would I know,' said Faxy, 'when the old devil won't even talk about them?'

'That's bad, Faxy,' said Father Ring gravely. 'That's

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very bad. That's a great risk you're running, isn't it, a man like you that must have a lot of wages coming to him? If anything happened to him you might be thrown out on the street without a ha'penny. Whisper here to me,' he went on, drawing Faxy closer and whispering into his ear the way no one but a Kerryman can do it, without once taking his eyes off the man's face, 'if you want to make sure of your rights, see he has his affairs in order. Leave it to me and I'll do what I can.' And he nodded and winked and away with him up the stairs, leaving Faxy gaping after him.

He opened the door a couple of inches and bowed his head and smiled in with his best excuse-me, God-help-me expression. The smile was the hardest thing he ever had to do because the smell was something shocking. Then he tiptoed in respectfully with his hand held out.

'My poor man,' he whispered. 'My poor fellow! How are you at all? I needn't ask.'

'Poorly, father, poorly,' rumbled Devereux, rolling his lazy bloodshot eyes at him.

'I can see that. I can see you are. Isn't there anything I can do for you?' Father Ring tiptoed back to the door and gave a glance out the landing. 'I'm surprised that man of yours didn't send for me,' he said reproachfully. 'You don't look very comfortable. Wouldn't you be better off in hospital?'

'I won't tell you a word of a lie, father,' Devereux said candidly, 'I couldn't afford it.'

'No, to be sure, to be sure, 'tis expensive, 'tis, 'tis,' the priest agreed. 'And you have no one to look after you?'

'I have not, father, I'm sorry to say,' boomed Devereux.

'Oh, my, my, my! At the end of your days! You couldn't get in touch with the daughter?'

'No, father, I could not.'

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‘ I’m sorry for that. A great disappointment, the same Julia.’

‘ Joan, father,’ said the old man.

‘ Joan, I mean. To be sure, to be sure, Joan. A great disappointment !’

‘ She was, father.’

And then when Devereux had told his little story, Father Ring whispered, bending forward with his hairy hands joined.

‘ Tell me, wouldn’t it be a good thing if you had a couple of nuns ?’

‘ A couple of what, father ?’ Devereux asked, gaping.

‘ A couple of nuns. From the hospital. They’d look after you properly.’

‘ Ah, father,’ the old man said indignantly, as if the priest was after accusing him of something nasty, ‘ sure I have no money for nuns.’

‘ Well, now,’ said Father Ring, pursing his lips, ‘ you could leave that to me. Myself and the nuns are old friends. Sure, that man, that What’s-his-name — that fellow you have downstairs — sure that poor unfortunate could do nothing for you !’

‘ Only break my heart, father,’ Devereux sighed gustily. ‘ I won’t tell you a word of a lie. He have me robbed.’

‘ Well, leave it to me,’ said Father Ring with a wink.

Downstairs he whispered into Faxy’s ear with his hand shading his mouth and his two eyes following someone down the street :

‘ I’d say nothing just at present, Faxy. I’ll get a couple of nuns to look after him.’

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One was old and tough and Faxy instantly christened her ‘the sergeant-major.’ The second was young and good-looking.

‘Come now,’ said the sergeant-major to Faxy. ‘Put on this apron and give that floor a good scrubbing.’

‘Scrubbing?’ bawled Faxy. ‘Name of Ja——’ and just stopped himself in time. ‘What’s wrong with that floor?’ he snarled. ‘You could eat your dinner off that floor.’

‘Dear knows, there’s the makings of a dinner there,’ said the sergeant-major, ‘but ’twouldn’t be very appetising. I have a bath of water on for you. And put plenty of Jeyses’ Fluid.’

‘I was discharged from the army with rheumatics,’ said Faxy, grabbing his knee. ‘Light duty is all I’m fit for. I have it on my discharge papers. And who’s going to look after the shop?’

No use. Down he had to go on his knees, like any old washerwoman, with a coarse apron round his waist, and scrub every inch of the floor with carbolic soap and what he called Jeyses’ Fluid. The sergeant-major was at his heels, telling him to change the water and wash out the brush and cracking jokes about his rheumatics till she had him lepping. Then, under the eyes of the whole street, he had to get out on the window-ledge and wash the window and strip away the comforting felt that had kept out generations of draughts; and after that he had to scrape the walls while the young nun went after him with a spray, killing the bugs, she said, as if a couple of bugs ever did anyone any harm. Faxy was muttering rebelliously to himself about people that never saw anything only plank their ass in a feather bed, while poor soldiers slept out on gravestones with corpses piled on top of them and never complained. From his Way of the Cross he glared at Devereux, only asking for one word of an order to down tools, but the old man only

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looked away at the farther wall with bleared and frightened eyes. He seemed to imagine that all he had to do was lie doggo to make the sergeant-major think he was dead.

But then his own turn came, and Faxy, on his face and hands on the landing, looked up through the chink in the door and saw them strip old Devereux naked to God and the world and wash him all down the belly. ‘Sweet Christ preserve us !’ he muttered. It looked to him like the end of the world. Then they turned the old man round and washed him all down the back. He never uttered a groan or a moan, only ‘Yes, sister’ and ‘No, sister,’ and relaxed like a Christian martyr in the flames ; looking away at the floor or ceiling so that he wouldn’t embarrass them seeing them see what they had no right to see. He contained himself till he couldn’t contain himself any longer, and then burst into a loud groan for Faxy and the bucket, but Faxy realised with horror that even this little bit of decency was being denied him and he was being made to sit up in bed with the young one supporting him under the armpits while the sergeant-major planted him on top of some new yoke she was after ordering up from Cashman’s.

It was too much for Faxy. He moaned and tore his hair and cursed his God. He didn’t wait to see the old man’s hair cut and his mattress and bed-clothes that he had lain in so comfortably all the long years taken out to be burned, but prowled from shop to street and street to shop, looking up at the window and listening at the foot of the stairs, smoking Woodbine after Woodbine and telling his story to all that passed. ‘We didn’t know how happy we were,’ he snarled. ‘We had a king’s life with no one to boss us and now we’re like paupers in the workhouse, without a thing we can call our own.’

He was even afraid to go into his own kitchen, for fear the sergeant-major would fall on him and strip him

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as well. The woman had no notion of modesty. She might even say he was dirty. A woman that would say what she said about the bedroom floor would say anything. It was only when her back was turned that he crept up the stairs on tiptoe and silently pushed in the door. The change from that morning was terrible. It went to Faxy's heart. The windows were open above and below, there was a draught that would skin a brass monkey and a vaseful of flowers on a little table by the bed. The old man was lying like a corpse, clean and comfortable but in a state of complete collapse. It was only after a few moments that he opened his weary bloodshot eyes and gazed at Faxy with a distant, broken-hearted air. Faxy stared down at him, like a great gaunt bird of prey, clutching his ragged old shirt back from his chest with his claws and shaking his skeleton head.

'Jasus,' he whispered in agony, "'tis like a second crucifixion.'

'Gimme a fag, Faxy,' pleaded Devereux in a dying voice.

'Ask your old jenny asses for one,' hissed Faxy, malevolently.

4

Devereux was just beginning to recover from the shock when Father Ring called again.

'My poor man,' he said, shaking Devereux's hand, 'how are you today? You're looking better. They're great women, aren't they? Tell me, are they feeding you properly?'

'Very nice, father,' Devereux said feebly in a tone of astonishment, as if he thought after the way they behaved to him that they might feed him through a pipe, 'very nice indeed. I had a nice little bit of chicken and a couple of poppies and a bit of cabbage.'

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' You couldn't have nicer,' said Father Ring, smacking his lips.

' I had, indeed,' Devereux boomed, lifting his arm and looking at the clean hairy skin inside the clean shirt-band as if he wondered who it belonged to. ' And I had rice pudding,' he added, ' and a cup of tea after.'

' Ah, man, they'll have you trotting round like a circus pony before you're done,' said Father Ring.

' I'm afraid it came too late, father,' sighed Devereux, as if the same thought had crossed his own mind and been rejected.

' Well, well,' the priest said earnestly, ' if 'tis God's holy will, we must be resigned. I say we must be resigned. It comes to us all, sooner or later, and what need we care if our conscience is clear and our — oh, by the way, 'pon my soul, I nearly forgot — I suppose your own affairs are in order ? '

' What's that, father ? ' whispered Devereux with a timid, trapped air, raising his head a fraction of an inch off the pillow.

' Your affairs, I say ? Are they in order ? I mean, have you your will made ? '

' I won't tell you a word of a lie, father,' mumbled the old man bashfully, ' I have not.'

' Well, now, listen to me,' Father Ring said persuasively, pulling his chair closer to the bed, ' wouldn't it be better for you ? Sure, God between us and all harm, it might happen to anyone. It might happen to myself and I'm a younger man than you.'

' Wouldn't I want an attorney, father ? ' asked Devereux.

' Ah, what attorney ? ' exclaimed Father Ring. ' Aren't I better than any attorney ? As it happens,' he said, scowling and fumbling in his pockets, ' I have some writing paper along with me. I hope I didn't leave my specs behind. I did, as sure as you're there, I did !

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What sort of old head have I at all? No, I declare to my goodness, I didn't, for once. Ah, sure, man alive,' he said, looking at Devereux over the specs, 'I have to do this every month of my life. 'Tis astonishing, the people that leave it to the last minute. . . . I may as well get it down as I'm here. I can write the rigmarole in after. What'll we say to begin with? You'd like to leave a couple of pounds for Masses, I suppose?'

'God knows I would, father,' Devereux said devoutly.

'Well, what'll we say? Ten? Twenty?'

'I suppose so, father,' Devereux said vaguely.

'Well, now, make it whatever you like,' said Father Ring, pointing the fountain-pen at him like a dart and giving him a long look through the spectacles, a sort of professional look, quite different from the one he gave over or round them. 'But remember, Masses are the only investment you can draw on in the next world. The only friends you can be sure won't forget you. Think again before you say the last word on Masses!'

'How much would you say, father?' asked Devereux, hypnotised by the gleam of his spectacles like a rabbit by the headlights of a car.

'Well, that's for you to say. You might like to make it a hundred or even more.'

'We'll say a hundred,' said Devereux.

'Good man! Good man! I like a man that knows his own mind. And what'll we do about the—' he nodded in the direction of the door, 'the holy ladies? 'Twould be expected.'

'Would the same thing be enough, father?'

'To tell you the truth I think it would,' said Father Ring, bobbing his head and giving an unprofessional dart over the back of his specs. 'I'll go farther, Mr. Devereux. I think 'twould be generous. Women are all lick alike. A fool and his money — you know the old proverb?'

'I do, father.'

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'And as we're on to charities, what about the monks ?'

Devereux gave him an appealing glance. Father Ring rose, pursing his lips and putting his hands behind his back. He stood at the window and looked down the street with his head on his chest and his eyes strained over the specs.

'Look at that scut, Foley, sneaking into Hennessey's pub,' he said as if he was talking to himself. 'That fellow will be the death of his poor wife. . . . I think so, Mr. Devereux,' he added in a loud voice, turning on his heel and raising his head. 'I think so. Religious orders ! 'Tisn't, God knows, for me to be criticising them, but they'd surprise you. Surprise you ! The jealousy between them over a couple of hundred pounds ! Those poor monks would be fretting over a slight like that for years to come.'

'Twouldn't be wishing to me, father,' said old Devereux, shaking his head regretfully.

'Twouldn't, man, 'twouldn't, 'twouldn't,' said the priest as if he was astonished at the old man's perspicacity. 'You're right, Mr. Devereux, 'twould not indeed be wishing to you,' implying by his tone that if the bad wishes of the monks didn't actually follow the old man into the other world they'd make very heavy weather for any prayers that did. 'Now, coming nearer home,' he whispered with a nervous glance over his shoulder, 'what about that man of yours ? They'll be expecting you to provide for him.'

'He robbed me, father,' Devereux said sullenly, his heavy face settling into the expression of an obstinate child.

'Ah, let me alone, let me alone ! ' said Father Ring, waving the paper in his face with exasperation. 'I know all about it. That British Army ! 'Tis the ruination of thousands.'

'The couple of Woodbines I'd have,' the old man went on, turning his bleary eyes on the priest while his

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deep voice throbbed like a 'cello with the dint of self-pity, ' he used to steal them on me. Often and often — I wouldn't tell you a word of a lie, father — I went down to the shop of a morning and I wouldn't have a smoke. Not a smoke ! '

' Oh, my, my ! ' said Father Ring, clucking and nodding.

' The packets of Lux,' said Devereux solemnly, raising his right hand in affirmation, ' as true as the Almighty God is looking down on me this instant, father, he'd take them out and sell them from door to door, a half-dozen for the price of a medium ! And I sitting here without a Woodbine ! '

' Well, well,' said the priest. ' But still, Mr. Devereux, you know you're after forgiving him all that.'

' Forgiving him is one thing,' said the old man stubbornly, ' but leaving him a legacy is another thing entirely. Oh, no, father.'

' But as a sign you forgive him ! ' the priest said coaxingly. ' A what'll I call it — a token ? Some little thing ! '

' Not a ha'penny, father,' said Devereux in a voice of doom, shaking his shaven head as if it was the bell that tolled for Faxy's funeral. ' Not one solitary ha'penny.'

' Well, now, Mr. Devereux, fifty pounds,' Father Ring pleaded. ' 'Twouldn't break you and 'twould mean a lot to that poor wretch.'

' Ah, what fifty pounds ? ' snarled Faxy, and there he was in on top of them, a great gaunt skeleton of a man with mad staring eyes and his fists clenched. ' Is it mad ye are, the pair of ye ? Fifty pounds ? '

Old Devereux began to struggle frantically up in the bed, throwing off the bed-clothes with his swollen old hands and gasping for the breath that would enable him to say what he thought of Faxy.

' You robber,' he croaked, ' if I done you justice, I'd

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have you up in the body of the gaol.'

'Come now, come, come, come, Mr. Devereux,' cried Father Ring in alarm, putting down his papers and trying to get the old man to lie back. 'Compose yourself.'

'I won't give him a ha'penny,' roared Devereux in a voice that could be heard at the other side of the street. 'Not one ha'penny. Leave him support himself out of all he stole from the till.'

'And a hell of a lot there ever was to steal,' hissed Faxy, with his gaunt head down, grinning back at him like a demented skeleton.

'Not a ha'penny,' repeated the old man frantically, pummelling his knees with his fists and blowing himself up like a balloon till he turned all colours.

'Two hundred and fifty pounds,' snarled Faxy between his toothless gums, pointing with his finger on the palm of his hand as if he had it all written down there. 'That's what I'm owed. I have it all down in black and white. Back wages. The War Office won't see me wronged.'

'You robber!' shouted Devereux, panting.

'Sister!' cried Father Ring, going to the door and throwing it wide open. 'Sister Whatever-your-name-is, send for the police. Tell them I want this fellow locked up.'

'Leave that wan out of it,' cried Faxy, growing pale and dragging him back from the door. Faxy wasn't afraid of the police, but the sergeant-major of the nuns put the fear of God in him. 'We want no nuns. Play fair and fight your own corner like a man. Fair play is all I ask. God knows, I done for him what no one else would do.'

'Mr. Devereux,' said Father Ring earnestly, 'he's right. The man is right. He's entitled to something. He could upset the will.'

'Jasus knows, father,' said Faxy, sitting down on the

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edge of the bed and beginning to sob like a child while he brushed the tears away with the back of his hairy hand, ‘that’s not what I want. I deserved better after all my years. No one knows the sufferings I seen.’

‘Black puddings and ould sausages,’ croaked the old man. ‘Not one decent bite of food crossed my lips, father, all the long years he’s with me. Not till the blessed nuns came did I get one proper bite to eat.’

‘Because they can get the credit,’ snarled Faxy, drying his tears and shaking his fist at his employer. ‘If you landed me out the money instead of locking it up in your box you could have bacon and cabbage every day of your life. I was a batman to better men than you, but you were too near, you ould bugger you, and now ’tis going on you whether you like it or not, on medicines and Jeyses’ Fluid and chamber-pots. That’s all you have out of it at the end of your days.’

‘Be quiet now, be quiet,’ said Father Ring. ‘You’ll get something. I’ll take it on myself to put him down for another hundred, Mr. Devereux. Is that right?’

‘A hundred strokes of the cat-and-nine-tails,’ grumbled the dying man. ‘But I won’t go again’ you, father. . . . That it may choke you,’ he added charitably to Faxy.

‘And now, Mr. D., I won’t keep you much longer. There’s just Julia.’

‘Joan, father,’ said Devereux.

‘Joan, I mean. To be sure, Joan. Or the little — you know who I’m talking of? Was it a little boy? ‘Pon my soul, my memory is gone.’

‘Nothing, father,’ the old man said firmly, settling himself into his pillows.

‘What’s that?’ shouted Faxy, scandalised. ‘Your own daughter?’

‘Now, now, Mr. Devereux,’ said Father Ring. ‘Whatever little disagreement ye had, or whatever upset she caused you, this is no time to remember it.’

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'Not a ha'penny,' said Devereux moodily. 'I'll be good to them that were good to me. I leave the rest of my money to the Church.'

'Christ look down on the poor,' cried Faxy, raising his long arms to Heaven. 'Stick and stone instead of flesh and bone.'

'Will you be quiet?' Father Ring said testily. 'Now, Mr. Devereux, I understand your feelings, but 'tisn't right. Do you know what they'd say about that? That there was undue influence. You might have the whole will upset on you for the sake of — what'll I say? A hundred? Two hundred? A trifle would put it in order.'

'This is my will, father, not yours,' said old Devereux with monumental firmness. 'I'm after telling you my wishes and Faxy here is a witness. Every penny of my money is to go to the Church, barring a few pounds to keep the family vault in order. The Devereuxs are an old family, father,' he added with great calm and pride. 'They were a great family in their day and I'd like their grave to be kept in order when I'm gone.'

That night the substance of the will was the talk of the town. Many blamed old Devereux for being hard and unnatural, though more blamed Father Ring for being always so grasping. Faxy got credit on the strength of it and came home fighting drunk, shouting that the priest had cheated him and that he was the lawful heir; but the nuns locked him out, so he slept in the straw in Kearney's yard, waking up in the middle of the night and howling like a dog. By that time he thought himself alone in the world. But the old man had no notion of dying. He began to improve under the care of the nuns. He had a little handbell on the table by his bed, and whenever he felt bored he rang for the old nun to keep him company. He took a great liking to the sergeant-major, and he rang whenever he remembered any more

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he could tell her about the history of the Devereuxs. When he got tired of that, he took hold of her hand and got her to read him chapters from the *Imitation of Christ* or the *Lives of the Saints*.

‘That’s beautiful reading, sister,’ he said, stroking her hand.

‘Oh, sure, there’s nothing nicer,’ said the nun.

‘Beautiful reading,’ said Devereux. ‘I missed a lot in my life, sister.’

‘Ah, we all missed a lot,’ she said, ‘but God will make it up to us, we hope. Sunshine in this life, shadow in the next.’

‘I’d like a bit of sunshine too, sister,’ he said. ‘Ye’re very good to me and I didn’t forget ye in my will.’

He talked the devil of a lot about his will and even said he was thinking of changing it in favour of the nuns. The trouble was he couldn’t ask Father Ring to do that, and he never liked solicitors from the time they started sending him letters. He got real lively at times.

‘I suppose you’ll be renewing that bottle for me, sister?’ he said.

‘I’m sending down to the chemist’s for it now,’ she replied.

‘I wonder would you get something else for me as well?’ he asked.

‘To be sure I will. What is it?’

‘Well,’ he boomed earnestly, ‘I’d like a little drop of hair-oil, if you please. My hair doesn’t lie down well without it. The scented kind is the kind I like.’

She got him the hair-oil and did his hair for him while he looked at her fondly and commented on her hands. Beautiful gentle hands, he said she had. Then he asked for the mirror. He was very shocked by what he saw and tears came to his eyes.

‘Now,’ she said briskly, ‘there’s a handsome man for you!’

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'I was very handsome once, sister,' he said mournfully. 'The handsomest man in this town I was supposed to be. People used to stop and look after me in the street. Dandy Devereux they used to call me.'

Then he asked for the scissors to clip his moustache.

He made a most beautiful and edifying death with the two nuns kneeling beside him, saying the prayers for the dying, and when they washed him and laid him out, the sergeant-major went down to the kitchen and had a good cry all to herself.

'Tis a hard old life,' she said. 'We're left with them long enough to get fond of them, and then they get better and you never see them again, or else the Lord takes them. If 'twas only an old dog you'd be sorry for him, and he was a fine gentlemanly old man, God rest him.'

Then, having tidied away her pots and pans and gone in for a last look at old Devereux, the man who used to stroke her hands and praise them the way no one did since she was a girl, she washed her eyes and went back to her convent.

After Requiem High Mass next day Devereux went to join the rest of his family under the ruined walls of the abbey they had founded in the fifteenth century, and by the time Father Ring got home from the funeral Faxy had already started prying. The great iron-bound chests were in the centre of the floor and Faxy had borrowed a chest of tools. They opened them between them, but there was nothing inside them only old screws, bolts, washers, bits of broken vases, cogwheels of clocks and an enormous selection of pipe bowls and stems. Father Ring was so incredulous that he put on his spectacles to examine them better. By that time he was prepared to believe they were pieces of eight in disguise.

'I made a mistake,' he said, sitting back on the ground beside the chest. 'I should have asked him where he had it.'

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They stayed on till midnight, searching. Next day they had two men in from Jerry MacMahon's, the builder's. Every floor was ripped up, every chimney searched, every hollow bit of wall burst in. Faxy was first everywhere with a bit of lighted candle in his hand, and Father Ring followed, stroking his chin. A crowd had gathered in the street outside and he stood in the window and surveyed them moodily over his glasses. Murphy the undertaker came up the stairs.

'Did ye find it yet, father?' he asked anxiously. Murphy was owed thirty quid, so he had cause for anxiety.

'I'm afraid, Eddy,' said Father Ring, looking at him round his glasses, 'we were had. We were had, Eddy, boy, the lot of us. 'Tis a great disappointment. A great disappointment, but 'pon my soul he was a remarkable man.'

Then he took his shabby old soft hat and went home.

THE HOUSE THAT JOHNNY BUILT

I

EVERY morning about the same time Johnny Desmond came out to the door of his shop for a good screw up and down the street. He was like an old cat stretching himself after a nap. He had the old cap down over his left eye and his two hands in his trousers pockets, and first he inspected the sky, and then he inspected the Square end of Main Street, and after that the Abbey end, and then there were a lot of small personal stares at other shops and at people that passed. Johnny owned the best general store in the town, a man that came in from the country with nothing, without a boot to his foot, as you might say. He had a red face, an apoplectic face, that looked like a plum pudding you'd squeezed up and down till it all bulged sideways, so that the features were all flattened and spread out and the two eyes narrowed into slits. As if that wasn't enough, he looked at you from under the peak of his cap exactly as if you were the headlights of a motor car, with his right eye cocked and his left screwed up till his whole face was as wrinkled as a roasted apple.

Now one morning as Johnny looked down towards the Abbey, what should he see but a handsome woman in a white coat coming up towards him, with her two hands in her coat pockets and her head down. She was a woman he'd never before laid eyes on to his knowledge, and he stared at her and saluted her, and then stood looking after her with his left eye closed as if he was still a bit blinded by her headlights.

‘ Tom ! ’ he called without looking round.

‘ Yes, Mr. D.,’ said his assistant from inside the counter.

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‘ Who’s that, Tom ? ’ asked Johnny.

‘ That’s the new doctor,’ said Tom.

‘ Doctor ? ’ said Johnny, swinging his head right round.

‘ Doctor O’Brien in the Dispensary.’

‘ Which O’Briens are they, Tom ? ’ asked Johnny in a baffled tone.

‘ Mickey the Miser’s,’ said Tom.

‘ Mickey of Asragh ? ’ exclaimed Johnny as if he couldn’t believe it.

Every morning after that he waited for her, and even strolled up the street along with her, rolling along beside her like a whiskey keg on props and jingling the coin in his trousers pockets.

‘ Tom ! ’ he called when he got back.

‘ Yes, Mr. D.’ says Tom.

‘ There’s style for you, Tom ! ’ grunted Johnny.

‘ She can damn well afford it,’ said Tom.

‘ There’s breeding for you ! ’ said Johnny.

‘ She’s a bitch for her beer,’ said Tom.

But beer or no beer — and Johnny wasn’t a heavy drinker himself — he was impressed. He ordered a new brown suit and a new soft hat, and on top of that he put on a new gold watch-chain and went off to the doctor’s digs one night. They showed him into the parlour. Parlours always fascinated Johnny. Leave alone the furniture, which is a book in itself, a roomful of photos will set up a man of an enquiring turn of mind for life. She came in, looking a bit bosomy in a yellow blouse, and he saw to his amusement that at the very first glance she took in the gold chain. She was a shy sort of girl and the most you got from her as a rule was a hasty glance, but that same would blister you. He liked that in her. He liked a girl not to be a fool.

‘ I suppose you’re surprised to see me ? ’ said Johnny.

‘ Arrah, I’m delighted,’ she said in a high sing-song,

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the way they speak in Asragh. ‘ I hope there’s nothing the matter ? ’

‘ Well, now,’ said Johnny, who was by way of being a bit of a joker, ‘ you put your finger on it. ‘ Tis the old heart.’

‘ Ah, is it codding me you are ? ’ she asked with a shocked look and her head lowered.

‘ Oh, the devil a cod ! ’ said Johnny, delighted with the reception he was getting. ‘ And there’s no one else I’d trust.’

‘ ‘ Tis probably indigestion,’ said she. ‘ Are you sleeping all right ? ’

‘ Poorly,’ said Johnny.

‘ Is it palpitations you have ? ’

‘ Thumps,’ said Johnny, indicating the way his heart went pit-a-pat.

‘ Ah, go to God ! ’ said she, drawing down the blind half-way and giving a look down the street. ‘ Open that old shirt of yours and give us a look at you.’

‘ Ah, I’d be too shy,’ said Johnny, drawing back.

‘ Shy my nanny,’ said she. ‘ What old nonsense you have ! Will you open it before I drag it off you ? ’

‘ And besides,’ said Johnny confidentially, ‘ what’s wrong with my heart wouldn’t show through the speaking-tube. Sit down there till I be talking to you.’

‘ Wisha, bad cess to you and your old jokes ! ’ she cried. ‘ Will you have a drop of whiskey — though God knows you don’t deserve it.’

‘ Whiskey ? ’ chuckled Johnny. ‘ What’s that ? Give us a drop till I see what ‘tis like.’

‘ That’s a new cigarette-case you have,’ she said as he passed her the fags. ‘ Is it silver ? ’

‘ It is,’ said Johnny.

‘ Arrah, Johnny,’ said she, screwing up her eyes as she struck a light, ‘ you must be rolling in dibs ? ’

‘ I am,’ said Johnny.

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So he took his glass and put one thumb in the armhole of his waistcoat and waited till she sat down on the sofa, with her goldy-brown hair coming loose, and the finest pair of legs in the county tucked away under her. Then he leaned back in his chair and gave his mouth a wiggle to limber it up.

'I'm fifty,' he said to the fire-screen. 'Fifty or near it,' he added to herself. 'I'm a well-to-do man. I never had a day's illness, barring one rupture I got about twelve year ago. 'Twas the way I was lugging an old packing-case from the shop to the van.'

'Was it an operation you had?' asked the doctor.

'Twas,' said Johnny.

'Was it Caulfield did it?'

'That fellow!' said Johnny contemptuously. 'I wouldn't leave him sew on a button for me. I had Surgeon Hawthorne. Forty-two pounds he charged me.'

'Forty-two?' said she. 'Ah, he saw you coming!'

'And sixteen for the nursing home,' Johnny said bitterly. 'I wish I could make my money as easy. But anyway, between the jigs and the reels I never thought much about marriage, and besides, the women in this town wouldn't suit me at all.' He let his chair fall back into position and bent across the table towards her with his hands clasped before him. 'The sort of man I am, I like a woman with a bit of style, and the women in this town that have any nature have no style, and the ones that have style have no nature. I declare to my God,' he burst out indignantly, waving his hand in the air, 'whatever the blazes they do to them in convent schools you couldn't get a laugh out of them. They're killed with grandeur. But you're different. You have the nature and you have the style.'

'Arrah, hold on, Johnny,' said the doctor, sitting up. 'What ails you? 'Tisn't asking me to marry you you are?'

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‘If ‘tisn’t that same, ‘tis no less,’ said Johnny stubbornly.

‘Why then indeed I’ll do nothing of the sort,’ said the doctor, with the Asragh lilt in her voice like a dive-bomber swooping and soaring ; as pretty a tune as ever you’d hear in the mouth of a good-looking girl, unless she actually happened to be pitching you to blazes. ‘Sure, God Almighty, Johnny, aren’t you old enough to be my father ?’

‘If I’m older I’m steadier,’ said Johnny, not liking at all the turn the talk was taking.

‘Ay,’ said she, ‘and so is the Rock of Cashel, but I never had much of a smack for history.’

‘What you should do,’ said Johnny cunningly, ‘is talk to your father about it. See what advice will he give you. He’s the smartest business man in this part of the world, and mind you, the man that says it is no fool.’

‘Ah, Johnny,’ said she, ‘will you have a bit of sense ? Sure, that sort of haggling between fathers is over and done with these fifty years. You wouldn’t get a girl in the whole county that would let her father put a halter round her neck like that.’

‘Is that so ?’ said Johnny, a bit taken aback.

‘Ah, sure, of course it is. God Almighty, Johnny,’ said she with the same dive-bomber swoop in her voice, ‘isn’t it the one little bit of pleasure we have in life ?’

‘I see, I see,’ said Johnny, meaning that he didn’t see at all, and he stood up and dug his hands in his trousers pockets and spun round on one leg, looking at the pattern on the carpet.

‘Of course,’ he went on, with a tormented air, ‘it might be you were misled about what I’m worth. I’m worth a lot of money. Even your friend the bank manager doesn’t know what I’m worth. No, nor half what I’m worth.’

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'Ah,' she said furiously, jumping up and giving him a glare, 'Con Doody never mentioned your name to me. Sure, I wouldn't give a snap of my fingers for all your old money !'

'And you won't talk to your father ?' asked Johnny morosely.

'Ah, what a thing I'd do !' said the doctor.

'There's no harm done,' said Johnny very stiffly. 'You'll excuse my asking,' and away he went in a huff. Next morning when she passed on her way to the dispensary there was no sign of him at the door of the shop, and the doctor, who by that time was beginning to be sorry for the way she took him, got into such a flaming wax that she told them all about it at the bridge party that evening. 'And I declare to God,' she said innocently by way of conclusion, 'he went out the door on me as if I was a bad neighbour that wouldn't give him the loan of my flat-iron.'

2

But there was one thing you couldn't help admiring about Johnny and that was his obstinacy. He was the sort of man that could do without something all the days of his life, so long as it didn't occur to him, but from the moment it did, it gave him no peace. A month passed ; two months passed, and Johnny never stopped thinking of it, and then one day away with him to young O'Connor, the County Council architect.

'Tell me,' said Johnny, leaning his two pudgy arms on the table, with his left eye screwed up and his lower lip thrust out, 'the couple of houses I have there at the corner of the Skehanagh Road — what sort of a place could you make of them ?'

'Begor, I don't know, Johnny,' O'Connor said blandly, 'unless you were thinking of giving them to the National Museum.'

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'I'm thinking of knocking them down,' said Johnny.

'Oh, I see,' said O'Connor, sitting back and folding his hands. 'You could do a nice little job there all right if you had the tenants.'

'Never mind about the tenants,' said Johnny. 'What I'm thinking of is a shop.'

'What sort of a shop?' O'Connor asked with new interest.

'That's for me to know and you to find out,' said Johnny with a grim chuckle. 'I want a new shop and a new house.'

'And I suppose I'm to find out what sort of house as well?' O'Connor asked innocently.

'How many rooms would there be in that house of the Bank Manager's?' asked Johnny.

'Doody's?' said O'Connor. 'But that's a big place, man.'

'You couldn't swing a cat in that old place I have now,' said Johnny.

'I see,' said O'Connor drily. 'You're going in for keeping cats?'

But it wasn't cats Johnny was going in for at all, but chemistry. A chemist's shop; the last thing in the world you'd think for a man that never in his life sold more than a cake of soap or a bottle of castor oil. The house was a grand affair. O'Connor got a free hand with everything; he chose the furniture, and he could have chosen the pictures as well, only by way of a joke he suggested a lot of Old Masters as being very suitable for a bachelor. And at that point Johnny said explosively that he was in no hurry; the pictures could wait.

He had the car to the station the evening the new chemist arrived. She was a very pretty girl, just out of training, very tall and sylph-like with enormous dark eyes and a pretty, pleasing, ladylike air. Johnny had driven himself and the maid nearly mad seeing that

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everything in the house was just right for her : flowers on her dressing-table, the towels fresh, the water piping hot. When he was that way he was like a hen with an egg ; poking round the kitchen and picking things up and asking what they were for. While the girl was upstairs he was walking from one room to another and stopping in the hall with his head cocked to hear what was the chemist doing now. He was in the hall when she came down, looking radiant. Small wonder, after all the stories she had heard about the awful lives of chemists in small towns in Ireland.

‘ Was everything all right ? ’ growled Johnny.

‘ Oh, grand, Mr. Desmond, thanks,’ she said cheerfully. She had the pleasantest manner of any girl Johnny had ever met.

‘ Be sure and ask if there’s anything you want,’ he said. ‘ The girl is new. She might forget. You’ll have a drop of sherry ? ’

‘ I’d love it, Mr. Desmond,’ she said, and he took her into the sitting-room. O’Connor had furnished it beautifully. She spread out her hands before the fire while he filled her out the sherry.

‘ Here’s health ! ’ he said.

‘ Good health ! ’ she said. ‘ My goodness, if daddy only saw me now ! ’

‘ How’s that ? ’ said Johnny.

‘ Oh, daddy is awful ! ’ she said. ‘ He’s a terribly severe man. He’s a clerk in the railway. He never lets us do anything. We’re not even let read a book except holy books, and we have to be in every night at ten.’

‘ By Gor ! ’ said Johnny, chuckling, ‘ I see I’ll have to keep you in order.’ But he didn’t hear more than half of what she said. His mind was on the supper, wondering what would go wrong with it. At the table he gave her more wine ; red wine this time, and the more she drank the more ladylike she became.

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'Is Mrs. Desmond not well?' she asked sweetly, leaning across the table with her pretty head on one side.

'Who's that?' asked Johnny with a start. He was just thanking God sincerely that the meat bit of it was nearly over, and a mistake wouldn't matter so much with the sweet.

'Mrs. Desmond,' she repeated. 'Your wife, I mean.'

'Aha,' chuckled Johnny, feeling the red wine warming him up at last, "'tis only the job in the shop that's filled. The other one is still vacant.'

'You mean you're not married at all?' she cried.

'I'm as free as the birds of the air, girl,' said Johnny.

He didn't notice the silence that came on her. He was too well pleased with himself. The supper had gone off splendidly, and when they went back to the sitting-room for their coffee Johnny was just beginning to get into his stride. He strode up and down the room, holding a fag in the hollow of his hand, and telling her about the shop he made his money in and the other chemist's shop in the town (run by a poor strolling devil of a chemist that gave credit to all the wrong people and didn't know where to turn for money). Johnny had it all taped. A man might be the best chemist in the world and still he might be a bad business man. 'There's three doctors,' he said. 'Woolley and Hyde and a woman doctor called O'Brien. She's in the Dispensary. Her father is a rich man. I dare say 'twas he got her into it.'

'Mr. Desmond,' piped the new chemist, standing up, 'you wouldn't mind if I ran down to the chapel to say a prayer?'

'The chapel?' cried Johnny in astonishment, for his brain didn't move too quickly.

'I won't be a minute,' she said eagerly.

'But 'tis raining cats and dogs, girl,' said Johnny crossly, going to the window. 'You'll be drenched.'

'Oh, I love the rain,' she said. 'Honest, I do.'

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'Wait a minute,' he growled. 'I'll run you down myself in the car.'

'Oh, no, no,' she cried nervously. 'Honest, you mustn't. I'd sooner go alone.'

'Oh, very well, just as you like,' grumbled Johnny, flustered and hot and upset. Everything had seemed to be splendid, and then all at once, and for no reason in the world that he could see, it had gone wrong. He stood in the hall as she went out into the rain and then peered after her down the street and shouted 'Don't be long !' His plum-pudding face was all screwed up in mystification. Nine o'clock ! What sense was there in that ? He took up a paper and laid it down every time he heard a woman's step. The chapel was only a couple of hundred yards away at the other end of the Main Street. At ten he got up and began to prowl about the room with his hands in his trousers pockets. The devil was in it if she didn't come home now, for the chapel shut at ten. The sweat began to break out on him, and he cursed himself and cursed his luck. The Town Hall clock struck eleven ; he heard the maid go up to bed and gave himself up to despair. Eleven o'clock meant scandal in the town. Nothing but misfortune ever came of women. What bad luck was on him the day he ever saw a strange woman in the town ? It was the doctor was behind all his misfortunes. Then he heard the sound of a car and his heart gave a great leap. All the bad language he was nursing to himself for the past couple of hours rose up in him, and after one savage glance at the clock he ran to the front door, determined to give the chemist a good lick of his tongue if she was out with a man to this hour. The car was drawn up at the kerb, the engine stopped and the side lights on. What black-guarding was she up to now ?

'Is that you ?' he snarled, leaning out into the spitting rain.

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'Why?' said a woman's voice. 'Were you waiting up for me?' and the door of the car opened and Dr. O'Brien skeltered across the pavement for shelter.

'Is there something up with the chemist?' he asked in terror.

'With who?' said the doctor, screwing up her face in the bright lamplight and pulling off her motoring gloves. 'I don't know what you're talking about. Aren't you going to ask us have we a mouth on us?'

'There's whiskey on the sideboard,' snapped Johnny distractedly. 'Take it and leave me alone. I'm demented! Demented! I thought you were the new chemist.'

'Wisha, Johnny, is this the sort of hours she's keeping?' asked the doctor in great concern as she filled her glass.

'She went down to the chapel to say a prayer,' Johnny ground out through the side of his mouth.

'Three hours ago,' he ended in a thunder-clap.

'Three hours ago?' she echoed, leaning her elbow on the sideboard, and looking a million times prettier than Johnny had ever seen her look in her tight-fitting coat and skirt with the little wisps of goldy-brown hair coming loose from under the cocky hat. 'She must have a lot of prayers said by now. Arrah, Johnny, I wouldn't like an ould one like that around the place at all! Sure, she'd have you persecuted with piety.'

'Hell to your sowl, woman!' roared Johnny, stopping dead in his bear-like shamble about the room, 'sure, the chapel is shut since ten!'

'And this her first night here and all!' exclaimed the doctor with her mouth agape. 'Ah, do you know, I'd say she must have drink taken! Did you try the Guards' barrack, Johnny?'

'Drink?' said Johnny. 'She had no drink. She had nothing, only a couple of glasses of wine to her supper.'

'And had she wine to her supper?' the doctor asked

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innocently. ‘Go on, can’t you ! ’Tis as good as a story-book. And what happened then ? ’

‘Then she said she wanted to go to the chapel,’ said Johnny, knowing well how queer it sounded.

‘And she with wine and everything to her hand ! ’ cried the doctor. ‘Arrah, Johnny, you must take me for a great gom entirely ! You’re not telling me the whole story at all. Go on now and tell me what did you do to the girl to drive her out on a night like this ? ’

‘Me ? ’ Johnny said indignantly. ‘I done nothing at all to her.’

‘Are you sure you didn’t give her an old squeeze or anything ? ’

‘Did I what ? ’ Johnny boomed in bellowing fury. ‘Ah, go out of my sight, you mocking jade you ! I have no time for bad-minded females like you.’

‘Bad-minded ? ’ said the doctor. ‘And the two of ye here with sofas and cushions and whiskey and wine and the devil knows what. How do I know what you’d do if you had a few drinks in you ? Maybe you’d be just as lively as the rest of them. Is she living here with you, Johnny ? ’ she asked with interest.

‘Where else would she live ? ’ growled Johnny.

‘And ye not married or anything ? ’ the doctor said reproachfully. ‘Maybe ’twas the way ’twas on her conscience and she went down to confession.’

‘What in God’s name do you mean, woman ? ’ Johnny asked, brought to a full halt, like a wild horse the trainer has played out.

‘Wisha, Johnny, are you ever going to get a bit of sense ? ’ she continued pityingly. ‘At your age oughtn’t you know damn well that in a town like this you couldn’t bring a girl of eighteen in to live with you ? ’

‘But God above,’ Johnny said in an anguished whisper, his face growing white, his hands clasped in supplication, ‘I meant no harm to the girl.’

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‘And how do you expect her to know?’ said the doctor. ‘She’s up in the digs now, if you want to know, doing hysterics on the old landlady. At least, she was when I left. She’s probably doped or dead by now, because I gave her enough to quieten a dance-hall. Give us her things and let us go home to our bed. God knows, Johnny, you ought to have more sense.’

As she was driving away with the chemist’s bags in the back of the car she suddenly put her head through the side window.

‘Johnny!’ she called.

‘What is it now?’ Johnny asked irritably, pulling up the collar of his coat and running across the pavement to her.

‘Tell us, Johnny,’ she said innocently, ‘why haven’t you pictures on the walls?’

‘Ask my arse!’ hissed Johnny malevolently, and strode back to the hall.

‘Johnny!’ she called. ‘Johnny, aren’t you going to kiss and be friends?’

‘Kiss my arse!’ shouted Johnny as he banged the door.

Next day about lunch-time he called down to the new shop. He had deliberately left it alone till then. The chemist was leaning over the counter to serve a customer with that pretty, deferential, nun-like air of hers, and when she saw him come in she smiled sweetly. A ravishing smile! It filled Johnny’s heart with bitterness to the brim. The devil a hair astray on her, and the night she was after giving him! He waited till the customer left and then called her into the parlour next door. She followed him obediently with her head in the air and the same smile on her lips.

‘You’re comfortable where you are?’ he asked gruffly.

‘Oh, very comfortable, Mr. Desmond, thanks,’ she replied eagerly.

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‘ ‘Twas a mistake about last night,’ he said awkwardly, lifting his cap and scratching his close-cut skull. ‘ ‘Twas my fault. I blame myself a lot for it. It should have occurred to me. But I’ll make it up on the wages.’

‘ Oh, that’s quite all right,’ she said. ‘ You see, it isn’t myself at all. It’s daddy. He’d kill me if he ever found out.’

‘ I wouldn’t wish for one thousand pounds,’ Johnny said slowly in a choking voice, ‘ that you’d think I intended anything wrong. If you saw Father Ring last night instead of— instead of the one you did see (the doctor’s name choked him for a moment), he’d tell you the same. If I did make a mistake ‘twas because the likes of it would never occur to me. I never in all my life was mixed up in work like that.’

‘ Mr. Desmond,’ she said with real distress, ‘ I’m very sorry. I see now how silly I was. The doctor told me.’

‘ There’s a certain thing I was going to say to you,’ said Johnny. He pulled a chair closer to him, rested his foot on the chair, his elbow on his knee, and then clasped his hands together as he looked at her. ‘ I wasn’t going to say it now or for a long time to come, till you’d have time to look round you and see what sort of man I was and what sort of a home had I. I’m afraid of no enquiry. I’m hiding nothing on you. That’s the sort of man I am. But after the people you saw,’ he went on, growing purple at the very thought of the doctor, ‘ and the things they may have said to you, I must say it now. I have no choice. There’s the house,’ he said with a wave of his hand. ‘ You see what it’s like.’

‘ Oh, it’s a beautiful house, Mr. Desmond,’ she said enthusiastically, standing on tiptoe.

‘ You might notice,’ he said, ‘ I left out the pictures. That’s a thing I’d sooner leave to yourself.’

‘ Excuse me,’ she asked in bewilderment, ‘ did you want *me* to choose the pictures for you?’

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'I want you to choose myself, girl,' Johnny said passionately, kicking the chair to the other side of the room. 'That was why I chose you from all the other girls in Dublin. I was sure you were the only one of them that would suit me.'

'Oh, but I couldn't do that, Mr. Desmond,' she cried in alarm, stepping back from him.

'Why couldn't you?' he asked.

'Oh, daddy would never allow it. He says I mustn't marry till I'm thirty.'

'I'll talk to your father,' said Johnny.

'Oh, no, please don't,' she said, nearly in tears. 'I know he wouldn't allow me, and anyway, Mr. Desmond, I don't want to get married. I don't really. I want to go into a convent or something, but I don't want to get married.'

'Don't say no now till you have time to look round you,' Johnny said shrewdly. 'I'd make you a good husband. My money is made, and when I die, if 'twas God's Holy Will I'd die before you, I'd leave you the richest woman in these parts. And I wouldn't spancel you,' he said passionately. 'When I'm dead whatever is mine is yours to do what you like with. If you wanted to marry again I wouldn't tie you.'

'Oh, please, please!' she said, sniffing, 'I don't want to get married at all. I'm too young, and besides I have a boy in Dublin, and he says he'll marry me when he gets a job.'

'Think over it,' said Johnny despairingly, 'you might change.'

'Yes, Mr. Desmond,' she said obediently, just as if he'd told her to change the lunch hour, and he knew she wouldn't while she went out backwards, as if she was afraid he might spring on her. He knew now there was a curse on him; that his luck was broken, and his beautiful house and furniture was all for nothing.

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He died less than a year later and the story goes in town that the chagrin of it went to his heart. The Foxy Desmonds of the Glen blew his fortune on fur coats and motor cars. Only the doctor believes it was all on her account, and that what he really died of was a broken heart. Women are great on broken hearts.

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EVERYONE was sorry after Sam Higgins, the head master. Sam was a right good skin ; one of the decentest men in Ireland but too honest. He was a small fat man with a round, rosy, good-natured, innocent face, a high bald brow and specs. He wore a bowler hat and a stiff collar the hottest day God sent, for no matter how sociable he might be he never entirely forgot his dignity. He lived with his sister Delia in a house by the station and suffered a lot from nerves and dyspepsia. When it was the nerves were bad he went on a skite. The skite, of course, was good for the nerves but bad for the dyspepsia, and after it he'd be for months on a diet and doing walks in the country. The walks, on the other hand, were good for the dyspepsia but played hell with the nerves, and Sam tried to take the harm out of them by dropping into Johnny Desmond's on his way home for a pint. Johnny had a sort of respect for him as an educated man, which Johnny wasn't, and a sort of contempt for him as a man that for all his education couldn't keep his mind to himself — an art Johnny was past-master of.

One day they happened to be discussing the Delea case. Father Ring had landed another big fish. This time it was old Jeremiah Delea that he had induced to leave every penny of his money to the Church and nothing to his own wife and family. There was to be law about it, so Johnny had heard, and Sam, of course, was delighted, for he hated the very sound of Ring's name.

‘ Fifteen thousand, I hear ? ’ he said with a chuckle.

‘ So I believe,’ said Johnny with a scowl. ‘ A man that couldn't write his name for you ! Now, what do you say to the education ? ’

‘ Oh, begor, what I always said,’ said Sam with his

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usual straightforwardness, ‘that ’tis nothing but a hindrance in this world.’

‘If he might have held on to the wireless shares,’ said Johnny, ‘he’d be worth another five thousand. I suppose that’s where the education comes in.’

‘Extraordinary man,’ said Sam, nodding his fat head, ‘extraordinary blooming man, making a will like that.’

‘He was,’ Johnny agreed a bit doubtfully. ‘Of course, he was always very religious.’

‘He was,’ said Sam drily, ‘particularly with Children of Mary.’

‘That so?’ said Johnny, as if he had never heard of a Child of Mary before.

‘And underclothes,’ added Sam. ‘They were the poor man’s great hobbies.’

That was Sam all out, too outspoken, too independent, and Johnny went to the shop door and looked after him, slouching up the Main Street with his fat little sailor’s roll and his bowler hat perched on one side of his head, and wondered to himself that an educated man wouldn’t have more sense.

When Sam got home, Delia and Mrs. MacCann were sitting on deck-chairs in the back garden, enjoying the sun. Nancy was a teacher in the girls’ school and in Sam’s eyes she was an angel in human form, though he hadn’t yet got round to the point of telling her so, because she wasn’t long a widow. She was small and gay with a long pale face and a slangy, go-as-you-please air.

‘How’re ye, Nancy?’ cried Sam heartily, holding out his fat paw.

‘Grand, Sam,’ she cried, as she sat upright, blushing and sparkling with pleasure. ‘And how’s the body?’

‘Fine,’ said Sam, throwing off his coat and squatting down to give the lawn-mower a drop of oil. ‘I heard as pleasant a bit of news today as I heard this long time.’

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‘ What’s that, Sam ? ’ asked Delia in her high-pitched, fluting voice.

‘ Chrissie Delea that’s going to law with Ring about the legacy,’ said Sam.

‘ Ah, you’re not serious, Sam ? ’ cried Nancy.

‘ Oh, begor I am,’ growled Sam. ‘ She has Cantly the solicitor in Asragh on it. Now Ring’ll be having Sister Mary Milkmaid and the rest making novenas to soften Chrissie’s hard heart. By God, I tell you ’twill take more than novenas to do that.’

‘ But, Sam,’ said Nancy with her pretty little face all puckered up, ‘ will she ever get it ? Anyone that got money out of a priest ought to have a statue put up to her.’

‘ Oh, begob, she’ll get it all right,’ said Sam. ‘ And what’s more, she’ll get rid of Ring. The bishop’ll never let it go to court after all the other scandals. Sure, old Miah was off his rocker years before he made that will. Didn’t I see him myself stopping little girls on their way from school and trying to look up their clothes ? ’

Delia blushed but Nancy guffawed, as she had a right to do, being a married woman.

‘ Arrah, Sam,’ she said with a toss of her saucy little head, ‘ we’ll have rare gas with a new priest and a new teacher.’

‘ A new what ? ’ asked Sam, stopping dead in his lawn-mowing.

‘ Didn’t Ormond tell you he’s getting the shift to Dublin ? ’ she asked in surprise.

‘ No,’ Sam said gravely, shaking his head, ‘ he did not, Nancy.’

‘ But surely to God, Sam,’ she said with a troubled look, ‘ Ormond would never keep it from you ? ’

‘ No,’ said Sam stubbornly, shaking his head. ‘ Ormond knows nothing of it, I’ll take my oath. Where did you hear it ? ’

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'From Plain Jane.' (She meant Miss Daly.)

'Ay,' said Sam darkly. 'And she got it from Ring. And Ring was up in Dublin for the last two days. Now we know what he was up for. You didn't hear who's coming in Ormond's place?'

'I didn't pay any attention, Sam,' said Nancy excitedly, 'but you're right. She said he was from Kerry.'

'Oh, a relation of Ring's for a fortune!' said Sam dolefully, wiping his sweaty brow.

And a relation it was. He arrived in a broken-down two-seater he seemed to think rather highly of. He was tall and thin with a high, bumpy forehead, high cheekbones and dirty colouring. He held himself very stiffly, obviously conscious of his figure. He wore a cheap city suit with stripes, and Sam counted two fountain-pens (one for red ink) and a battery of coloured pencils in his breast pocket. He had a little red diary cocking out of the top pocket of his waistcoat, and while Sam was talking he made notes — a really businesslike young man. Then he stuck the pencil behind his ear and his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and looked at Sam and giggled. Giggled was the only way Sam could describe it. It was almost as if he found Sam funny. Within five minutes he was giving him tips about the way they did things in Kerry. Sam, with his hands in his pockets and wearing his most innocent air, looked up at him with one eye cocked. His tone got drier and drier.

'You seem to get on very well with your class,' he said after he had watched Carmody at work.

'Oh, I make a point of it,' said Carmody in a shocked tone.

'Treat them as man to man like?' said Sam, luring him gently on with his insinuating air.

'That's the modern method, of course,' said Carmody.

'That so?' said Sam drily, and at the same moment

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he made a face. It was the first twinge of his nervous dyspepsia.

Himself and Nancy always had their lunch, sitting on the low wall between the two schools. They were there for about ten minutes when Carmody came out. He stood and sunned himself on the steps, sticking out his chest and taking in deep gulps of what a Kerryman would call the ozone.

‘Arrah, Sam,’ said Nancy, interpreting the pose, ‘isn’t he a grand figure of a man?’

As if he had heard her, Carmody came across to them with a quizzical air.

‘That’s a fine view you have,’ he said jocularly.

‘You won’t be long getting tired of it,’ replied Sam drily.

‘I believe it is a quiet sort of place,’ said Carmody, unaware of any lack of warmth.

‘It must be simply shocking after Kerry,’ said Sam, giving Nancy a nudge. ‘Were you ever in Kerry, Mrs. Mac?’

‘Never,’ said Nancy, joining in the sport. ‘I believe ’tis grand.’

‘Marvellous,’ said Sam mournfully. ‘You’d wonder where the people got all the brains from till you saw the scenery.’

‘Tell me,’ said Carmody, swallowing it all on his own account and full of concern for the benighted natives, ‘what do you do with yourselves?’

The impudence of that was too much even for Sam. He gaped at Carmody to see if he was in earnest and then pointed towards the town.

‘See the bridge?’ he asked in a dull voice.

‘I do,’ said Carmody with his head cocked.

‘See the abbey tower beyond it?’ asked Sam with his lower lip hanging.

‘I do, I do,’ replied Carmody efficiently.

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'When we get tired of life we throw ourselves off that,' said Sam.

'But, damn it, man,' said Carmody testily, 'I'm serious.'

'Oh, begor,' said Sam, indignantly, 'so'm I. 'Tis no joke throwing yourself off that.'

'I believe you have some sort of dramatic society,' said Carmody, turning to Nancy with his head in his chest as though he were refraining by sheer will-power from telling Sam what he thought of him.

'We have,' said Nancy. 'Why? Do you act?'

'A certain amount,' said Carmody. 'Of course in Kerry we go in for the intellectual drama more.'

'Intellectual?' murmured Sam blissfully. 'I know one little dramatic society that have a shock in store for them.'

'They need it,' snapped Carmody.

'They do,' said Sam blithely, skipping off the wall and looking up at Carmody with his lower lip hanging and the sunlight dazzling on his spectacles. 'And when you're finished with them the town needs a bit of attention. You might notice 'tis on the down grade. And then, you can have the whole blooming country to practise on. It often struck me it needed a bombshell to wake it up. Maybe you're the bombshell?'

It wasn't often that Sam, who was a bit tongue-tied, made a speech as long as that. It should have shut anybody up, but Carmody only stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, thrust out his chest and giggled.

'But of course I'm a bombshell,' he said with a look at Nancy.

A couple of days after, Sam dropped into Johnny's for his drink.

'Mrs. Mac and the new teacher are gone off for a spin,' said Johnny, watching him closely.

'Giving her a lift home,' said Sam vacantly. 'He

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does it every day. I hope she's insured.'

'No,' said Johnny, opening a bottle of sweets and cramming a handful into his mouth; 'out Bauravullen way they went. Have a couple of these, Mr. Higgins?'

'No, thanks, Johnny,' said Sam sourly, looking out the door so that Johnny wouldn't see the way it had hit him.

'Widows are the devil,' said Johnny, going to the door and looking out as he crunched boiled sweets. 'Anything at all so long as 'tis in trousers. I suppose they can't help it.'

'You seem to know a lot about widows,' said Sam.

'My own father died when I was only a boy,' said Johnny discreetly. 'Clever chap, that young Carmody,' he added with his eyes on the floor.

'A human bombshell,' said Sam with heavy irony.

'So I believe, so I believe,' said Johnny. 'A pity he's so quarrelsome in drink. Himself and Donovan of the Exchange were at it here last night. Father Ring is hoping he'll settle down. I dunno will he?'

'God forbid!' said Sam.

He went home but he could neither read nor rest. It was too cold for the garden, too hot for the room, so he put on his hat and went for a walk. The walk took him past Nancy's bungalow. There was no sign of life in it, and Sam didn't know whether that was a good or bad sign. He dropped into Johnny's expecting to find the Bombshell, but there were only a couple of fellows from the County Council there and Sam had four drinks which was more than was good for him. When he came out the moon was shining. He went past Nancy's bungalow again, and there, sure enough, was the two-seater and a light in the sitting-room window.

For two days after that he never showed his nose in the playground at lunch-time, but sat inside, by the way he was correcting exercises. When he looked out he saw

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Carmody leaning on the wall, giggling.

The afternoon of the third day Nancy called and Delia answered the door.

'Oh, my,' cried Delia in her laughing, piping voice, 'such a stranger as you're becoming!'

'You'd never guess what I was doing,' said Nancy.

'I believe you were motoring,' said Delia with a laugh.

'Arrah, you can't do anything in this old town,' said Nancy, hunching her shoulders. 'Where the blazes is Sam? 'Tis ages since I saw him.'

'He's in the workshop,' said Delia. 'Will I call him for you?'

'Come on till I have a talk to yourself first,' said Nancy gaily, grabbing her by the arm.

'And how's your friend Mr. Carmody?' piped Delia as they went into the sitting-room which faced out on the garden.

'Well, for God's sake, Dee,' said Nancy, 'don't go motoring with him! Whoever gave him that car was no friend.'

'I'm not in much danger of being asked, dear, am I?' Delia cried laughingly. 'You don't think he'd be interested in me? Does he still think Kerry is such a wonderful place?' she added with gentle malice. 'I dare say not.'

'Arrah, he'll settle down,' said Nancy with a shrug. 'Sure, a poor gom that was brought up in the wilds, what more could you expect?'

'I dare say,' Delia said wonderingly. 'He has every inducement.'

Just then Sam came up the garden and in the back door without noticing who was there. He stood at the door, wiping his boots, his hat down over his eyes and laughing in an embarrassed way.

'Oh, hallo,' he drawled. 'How're ye?'

'Grand, Sam,' said Nancy, sitting up straight and

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flashing him a ravishing look. ‘I didn’t see you these last few days.’

‘No,’ said Sam. ‘Working too hard. Or as hard as I’m let with people pinching my tools. Did you take the quarter-inch chisel, Delia?’

‘Is that a big chisel, Sam?’ she asked innocently.

‘No,’ he drawled with his head in the air and his lip hanging. ‘Don’t you know what a quarter of an inch is yet?’

‘I think it might be on top of the press, Sam,’ she said guiltily.

‘Why the hell women will never put things back where they find them,’ he grunted, getting a chair and pawing about on top of the press till he felt the chisel. Then he held it up to the light and closed one eye. ‘Holy God,’ he moaned, ‘were you using it as a screw-driver or what?’

‘I thought it was a screw-driver, Sam,’ said Delia with a nervous laugh.

‘You need one badly,’ he said feelingly. ‘You always had one loose.’

He went out again in disgust. There was silence for a moment and Delia laughed again, even more nervously.

‘He seems very busy,’ said Nancy in a hurt tone.

‘Oh, he’s always pulling the house to pieces,’ said Delia.

‘Has he anything on his mind?’ Nancy asked frankly.

‘No, dear,’ said Delia. ‘Only I suppose his digestion. That’s always on his mind.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Nancy with a shrug, but Delia saw she was deeply offended.

‘You’re not going so soon, Nancy?’ she asked as Nancy began to collect her things.

‘I promised Nellie the afternoon off,’ said Nancy in a huffy tone.

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'Oh, dear,' sighed Delia. 'Sam will be so disappointed.'

'Ah, I suppose I'll be seeing him soon again,' said Nancy. 'So long, Delia.'

'Good-bye, dear,' said Delia sweetly, and when she shut the door behind Nancy she began to cry. In a small town the end of a friendship has something awful about it, and Delia had had notions of something better than friendship. Whenever Nancy came to the house Sam was more cheerful and Delia was more cheerful. She brought youth and gaiety into their lives. She had a good long cry to herself before Sam came in from the back. He didn't say a word about Nancy but went into the front room and took down a book. After a while Delia washed her eyes and went in. It was almost dark in there, and when she opened the door he started — a bad sign.

'You wouldn't like to come for a little walk with me, dear?' she asked in a voice that almost went off into a squeak.

'No, Dee,' he said without looking round, 'I wouldn't be able for it.'

'I'm sure a little drink in Johnny's would do you good, dear,' she went on.

'No, Dee,' he said dully, wiping his bald brow, 'I couldn't be bothered with him.'

'Then wouldn't you run up to town and see a doctor, Sam?'

'No good,' said Sam.

'But it must be something, Sam,' she persisted, almost wishing he'd say it and be done with it and let her comfort him; the two of them there, growing old, in a lonesome unfriendly place.

'Ah, 'tis that cheapjack in school,' said Sam. 'Twenty years I'm in that place and I was never laughed at to my face before. He's turning the boys against me now.'

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'I think you only fancy that, dear,' she said timidly.

'Oh, no, Dee,' said Sam, shaking his head, infallible even in despair, 'I do not. That fellow was put there with a purpose. Ring knew what he was doing. His plans are well laid. I spoke too soon — 'tisn't a new priest you'll be having here at all but a new headmaster.'

School was a real torture to him. Carmody half suspected he was jealous and played on him. He sent out kids to the girls' school with notes, and stood out before the class, reading the replies with a complacent grin on his face. Sam went about as if he was doped. He couldn't find things he had just left out of his hand ; he even forgot the boys' names, and sometimes he sat at a desk at the bottom of the class and rubbed his eyes and brow in a sort of stupor. He only came to life when Carmody and himself wrangled. There was a window Sam liked open, and when he opened it, Carmody sent a boy to close it. Then Higgins called the boy over and asked him who gave him permission to shut a window at the other side of the room. Then Carmody came up as stiff as a ramrod and said he wasn't going to work with a draught on the back of his neck, and Sam told him that a better man than him worked there for ten years and never complained of a draught.

All through November he ate his lunch at the school fire. When he got up he could see Nancy and Carmody sitting on the playground wall, and Nancy putting up her hand to smooth back her hair and breaking suddenly into a laugh. Somehow he always felt the laugh was at him.

One day he came out ringing the bell, and Carmody who was sitting on the wall jumped off with such an affectation of agility that the diary jumped from his waistcoat pocket. He was so occupied with Nancy that he didn't notice it. Sam went down the playground ringing his bell, his eyes on the ground so that he shouldn't

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see Nancy, and he didn't notice it either. He saw a bit of paper that somebody's lunch had been wrapped in and picked it up and crumpled it into a little ball. He noticed the diary in the same way and picked it up and began to read it without noticing what he was doing. Then he recognised the handwriting and looked round. Carmody was gone in. He couldn't help himself ; he had to read a bit more, and when he turned the pages and saw how much of it there was he put it in his pocket. During the first lesson he opened it on his desk and read it through with his head in his hands.

Now, Carmody was a conceited young man who thought everything about himself was of such importance that he had to write it down. Things Sam would almost be ashamed to think about himself he wrote down. Besides, Sam had lived a sheltered sort of life. Whenever he thought about Nancy he thought of her as an angelic little creature whose happy life had been wrecked and who spent the greater part of her spare time thinking about her dead husband. It was clear from the diary that that wasn't the way she spent her time at all, but that like any other bad, flighty, sensual girl, she let herself be made love to in a motor car by a cheapjack like Carmody, who on his own admission began with no respect at all for her. 'Anything at all so long as 'twas in trousers,' as Johnny said. Johnny was right. Johnny knew what she was like. That was all Sam needed to make him hate her as much as he hated Carmody. He joined his hands and closed his eyes.

Then he looked at the clock. He went to the blackboard to get ready for the dictation lesson. He wiped out the sums on it and wrote in a neat workmanlike hand the heading for dictation. It was 'The Diary of a Cheapjack.' Then as the boys settled themselves down he began to read.

'October 21st,' he dictated in a dull voice, turning

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his eyes to the ceiling as if he was watching a bluebottle.
‘Kissed her for the first time.’

There was a shocked silence and some fellow giggled.

‘It’s all right,’ said Sam blandly, pointing to the blackboard. ‘I told you this fellow was only a cheap-jack, one of those lads you see at the fair, selling imitation jewellery. You’ll see it all in a minute.’

And on he went again in his monotonous voice, with one hand holding the book and the other in his trousers pocket. It was all he ever thought of Carmody only worse. Carmody told how he had had made love to Nancy just to keep his hand in, and how love came to him at last one evening up Bauravullen, as the sun was setting behind the pines and the pair of them looked down at the river in the valley below them.

The fellows began to titter. Sam raised his brows and looked at them with a wondering smile as if he didn’t know what they were laughing at. He was beginning to enjoy it himself. He began to parody it in the style of a bad romantic actor, waving one arm, throwing back his head and cooing out the syrupy sentences. ‘And for a widow,’ he read, looking down the classroom at Carmody, ‘a woman that went through it all before.’

Carmody heard him and then recognised the diary. He came up the room in three or four swift strides and snatched the book from Sam. Sam let it go with him and then just gaped.

‘Hi, young man,’ he said amiably, ‘what are you doing with that?’

‘What are you doing with it?’ asked Carmody in a terrible voice.

‘Oh, that’s our piece for dictation,’ said Sam with his lip hanging, and he turned and looked at the blackboard. ‘I’m calling it “The Diary of a Cheapjack.” I think it’s a good title.’

‘You stole my diary,’ hissed Carmody.

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‘Your diary?’ drawled Sam incredulously. ‘You’re not serious?’

‘You knew well it was mine,’ shouted Carmody, beside himself with rage. ‘You knew my writing and you saw my name.’

‘Oh, begor, I did not,’ Sam said equably and solidly, shaking his head with an expression of utter innocence.

‘If anyone told me that thing was written by an educated man I’d have told him straight to his face that he was a liar.’

Then Carmody did the only thing he could do. He gave him a punch in the jaw. Sam staggered, righted himself and made a step towards him. They closed. The boys left their places, shouting, and one or two ran out of the school. In a few moments the two classes had formed a ring about them, shouting and cheering. Sam was small and gripped his man low. Carmody punched him viciously about the head, but Sam pulled him this way and that till he could scarcely keep his feet. At last Sam gave a great heave and Carmody went flying. His head cracked off the iron base of a desk. At the same moment Nancy and the other teacher came in.

‘Sam!’ she cried incredulously. ‘Con! What’s the matter?’

‘Get out of my way,’ shouted Carmody, skipping about her on his toes. ‘Get out of my way till I kill him.’

‘Come on, you cheapjack,’ drawled Sam in a low, scornful voice. His head was down, his hands were hanging, and he was looking at Carmody over his spectacles. ‘Come on and I’ll give you more of it.’

‘Oh, Mr. Higgins, Mr. Higgins,’ cried Miss Daly, ‘is it mad ye are, the pair of ye?’

They came to their senses at that. She rang the bell and cleared the school. Higgins turned away and began fumbling blindly with the lid of a chalk-box, and Carmody,

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lifting his foot on a desk, began to dust himself. Then himself and the two women went out into the playground and Sam heard them talking in loud excited voices. He smiled, took off his specs and wiped them, picked up his books, his bowler hat and his coat and locked the school door behind him. The three other teachers drew away as he came out and he went past them without looking. He left the keys at the presbytery and told the house-keeper he'd write. Next morning he went away by an early train and never came back.

We were all sorry for him. Poor Sam ! As decent a man as ever lived but too honest, too honest !

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I

YOUNG Charlie Lucey came down the Main Street, dragging the ould pup behind him on a length of clothes line. The pup had some notion that he was well acquainted with the whole town, man and dog, and skated along at the end of the rope with his paws splayed out at either side while he tried to dig himself in. Even when Charlie picked him up and gave him a few wallops, he still scrambled up his shoulder, yelping defiance on every side.

Outside his cousin Peter's house Charlie remembered it was a half day and his Uncle Tom was sure to be at home. He put down the pup and whistled. The hall door opened and Peter's mother came out. She was a tall, scraggy woman with thin hair plastered down at each side of her face, red-rimmed eyes and a queer pegged-up smile as if she was crying with her mouth and laughing with her cheek-bones.

'Peter'll be ready in a minute,' she said. 'Come in and wait for him.'

'Christ!' muttered Charlie to himself as he gathered up the pup and sat on a chair inside the hall door. There was a hall-stand as well, pictures and a carpet and a big red curtain at the foot of the stairs.

'Wisha, isn't that a queer old place you sit?' wailed his aunt with her God-help-us smile. 'Can't you go in and talk to your uncle?'

Though that was the last thing in the world Charlie wanted to do, he gathered up the old pup again and tiptoed to the parlour door. Then he remembered his Uncle Tom's notions about caps and overcoats, and not

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knowing but a pup might be regarded in the same light, he tied him to the leg of the hall-stand. He tiptoed in, so excited that he forgot to knock. His uncle was sitting under the window, reading. He was a small frail man, dressed in clerical black, with a long, pinched, yellow little face, tight lips, a narrow skull going bald up the brow, a little beard and a pair of tin specs. The front room was like the hall with a thick coloured carpet, a gilt mirror with cupids, an ornamental clock and a mahogany sideboard. A glass-fronted mahogany book-case ran the full length of one wall with all sorts of books in sets : the History of Ireland, the History of the Popes, the Roman Empire, the Life of Johnson and the Cabinet of Literature. Charlie had time to study it all because his uncle didn't notice him, or at least didn't pretend to.

' Hallo,' said Charlie at last.

' Ah, how are you, Charliss ? ' his uncle exclaimed benevolently in his dry, crackling little voice as he closed the book and rose with outstretched hand.

' All right,' said Charlie guardedly.

' Take a seat, Charliss,' said his uncle, pointing to a big armchair. ' Peter will be down in a minute.'

' I won't,' said Charlie. ' I'd be afraid of the ould pup.'

' That expression Charliss,' said his uncle, ' sounds to me like a contradiction in terms, but, not being familiar with dogs, I presume it's all right.'

As he put back his book, Peter came in. He was a plump, red-faced lad with a shock of brown hair and an easy confident manner.

' Where did you get the old beagle, Cha ? ' he asked in his deep voice.

' I bought him,' said Charlie, scenting criticism.

' For how much ? ' asked Peter.

' How much do you think ? ' asked Charlie.

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'He's not worth much anyway,' said Peter with a glance back at the pup.

'He's not what?' said Charlie indignantly. 'That's a damn fine pup, man. His mother was a setter.'

'And how's your father, Charliss?' asked Uncle Tom, holding the door open for them.

'His ould belly is bad again,' said Charlie. 'He'd be all right only the belly plays hell with him.'

'I'm sorry to hear it, Charliss,' said his uncle gravely. 'And tell me,' he asked with his little head on one side, 'what's he saying about me now?'

That was another dirty trick of his uncle's, assuming that Charlie's father was saying things about him, which, to give him his due, he generally was. But Charlie's father was admitted to be the cleverest man in town, while everyone agreed his uncle was queer.

'He's saying if you're not careful you'll end up in the poorhouse,' replied Charlie, who had some notion that if only his uncle knew what people thought of him he might reform.

'Your father is right as usual, Charliss,' said Uncle Tom with his legs spread out and his hands behind his back. 'There are two classes of people, Charliss — those who gravitate towards the poorhouse and those who gravitate towards the gaol. . . . Do you know what "gravitate" means?'

'I do not,' said Charlie.

"Gravitate," Charliss, means "tend" or "incline." Do you know what this is?' he asked, holding up a coin.

'I do, of course,' said Charlie; 'a tanner.'

'I am not familiar with that expression, Charliss,' said his uncle tartly. 'We'll call it a sixpence. Your eyes, I notice, gravitate towards the sixpence, and in the same way people gravitate either towards the gaol or the poorhouse. Only a small number of either party reach their destination, though — which is just as well for

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your father,' he added in a low impressive voice, swaying his whole body forwards and closing his lips tightly together. 'Do you understand a word I'm saying, Charliss?' he asked with a smile tipping either side of his hard little mouth.

'I do not,' said Charlie.

'Good man,' said his uncle approvingly. 'I like an honest manly spirit in anybody. Don't forget your six-pence, Charliss.'

They got out at last, but Charlie's troubles weren't over yet. On certain days it was next to impossible for his father to get back to the office. Half a dozen times at least he came to the hall door and stood leaning against the jamb with his hands in his pocket and his two legs crossed, looking up and down the street for someone to talk to or drink with. He was the County Council accountant and the most popular man in town. He knew everyone, saluted everyone and went to everyone's funeral. He was there now, a stocky, powerfully-built man in an old grey tweed suit and brown cardigan with a tweed cap over his eyes. He had a plump, dark hairy face; long, dark quizzical eyes that tended to close up in slits; hair in his nose and in his ears, and high hairy cheek-bones like cabbage patches.

'Hallo,' he drawled, looking them up and down while his cheek-bones crawled up his cheeks before his eyes and it was for all the world as though the cheek-bones were looking at them under the cap. 'Where are ye off to?'

'Looking for rabbits,' said Charlie.

'Rabbits?' echoed his father in surprise. 'But isn't that a queer way to bring the ferret?'

'Jasus, that's not the ferret,' shouted Charlie indignantly. 'That's the dog.'

'The what?' his father said incredulously. 'You don't mean he's a dog?'

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'He is,' Charlie said stoutly, 'and a bloody good dog too.'

'And who, ah, who trusted you with such a valuable animal?' his father asked severely.

'He belongs to Peter,' said Charlie.

'Is that so?' said his father. "'Pon my soul, Peter, I'm surprised at your father. I always thought he was a man of great taste. That's not what you'd call a classical dog, is it?'

'His mother was a setter,' said Charlie, on the verge of tears.

'Ah, it must have been a made match,' said his father. 'Well, Peter,' he went on jocosely, jingling the money and keys in his pockets, 'the studies are going on well, I hear? Carrying all before you, as usual? I suppose you were at the plays in the Town Hall?'

'I was,' Peter replied solemnly, feeling that some reflection on his father was implied. 'My father likes me to see a lot of the drama.'

'He does, to be sure,' said his uncle. 'He was always a bit of an actor himself. Well, boys,' he went on briskly with a wave of his hairy paw, 'men must work and women must weep. Bring us home a few rabbits for dinner. And be sure and look after the half-setter. A remarkable-looking dog!'

2

Charlie was going up the Courthouse steps when he saw Mackesy the detective pushing his bike round the corner. He stopped and hailed him. Charlie was like his father in that; he couldn't bear to let a man go by without a greeting.

'Hallo, Matt,' he said. 'Is it myself or my father you're coming for?'

'I'll let ye off today, Cha,' said Mackesy, making

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a sort of garden chair of the cross-bar of his bicycle.
‘ Though I wouldn’t mind having a few words with a certain namesake of yours.’

‘ A what, Matt ? ’ said Charlie, coming down the steps again on the scent of news. He was like his father in that too. He had a square, solemn, dark-skinned face with jet-black curly hair and a thick, red lower lip. He was a great man with greyhounds and girls and about as dependable with one as the other. ‘ You don’t mean that any of the Luceys is after forgetting himself ? ’

‘ Didn’t you hear ? ’ asked Mackesy suspiciously.

‘ Not a word, Matt,’ said Charlie earnestly.

‘ About Peter ? ’ added Mackesy, feeling for the pedal with his foot.

‘ What about Peter ? ’

‘ Oh, he hopped it.’

‘ You’re joking, Matt ? ’ said Charlie incredulously.

‘ There’s a lot of his clients would be glad if I was, Cha,’ said Mackesy. ‘ I thought you’d be the first to know, seeing ye were such pals.’

‘ We are, man, we are,’ cried Charlie. ‘ Sure, wasn’t I at the dogs with him — when was it ? Last Thursday.’

‘ And he didn’t say anything to you ? ’

‘ No, he didn’t,’ Charlie said thoughtfully, rubbing the handle-bar of the detective’s bicycle. ‘ Though, now you mention it, he was lashing pound notes on that Cloonbullogue dog. I told him the Dalys could never train a dog.’

‘ Begor, he must have been desperate,’ said Mackesy.

‘ Listen, Matt,’ Charlie said briskly. ‘ Give me twenty-four hours before you tell anyone else. I might be able to do something.’

Charlie tore through the Cashier’s Office, as one of the clerks said, ‘ like a unicorn.’ His father was sitting at his desk with a pipe in his mouth and the cap over his eyes, signing paying orders.

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‘ You didn’t hear anything about Peter ? ’ Charlie asked.

‘ No,’ his father said, putting down the fountain-pen.
‘ What is it ? ’

‘ Embezzlement,’ said Charlie. ‘ I’m just going up to the uncle’s to see what does he know.’

His uncle had a drapery shop in the square, near the ’98 monument. It was an old-fashioned popular shop where a lot of country people still went though the prices were high, and Tom in his irascible, opinionated way would never bate them. He said haggling was degrading ! There were three or four people there ; Con the assistant was attending them, and Charlie, after a hasty glance at him, went on through the shop to a little dark fitting-room looking out on a backyard. His uncle was leaning on the window-sill with his head in his hands, but when he saw Charlie he straightened himself up with fictitious jauntiness. With his old black coat and wrinkled yellow face he had begun to look rather like an old rabbi.

‘ Bad news travels fast, Charlie,’ he said in his dry little voice, closing his lips so tightly that the wrinkles ran up his cheeks from the corners of his mouth.

‘ It hasn’t travelled far beyond the barrack yet,’ said Charlie shortly. ‘ What the devil came over Peter, Uncle Tom ? ’

‘ Charliss,’ his uncle said solemnly, laying a long skinny hand lightly on Charlie’s sleeve and inclining his head to one side, ‘ you know more about it now than I do.’

‘ You don’t know how much it is ? ’ Charlie asked keenly.

‘ I do not, Charliss,’ said his uncle bitterly. ‘ I need hardly say Peter did not take me into his confidence.’

‘ And what are you going to do ? ’

‘ What can I do, Charliss ? ’ asked his uncle, the lines

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of pain on his withered-up face belying the harsh little staccato voice that broke up every sentence into disjointed phrases as if it were an oration. ‘ You saw yourself the way I reared that boy. You saw the education I gave him. I gave him the thing I was denied myself, Charliss. I gave him a decent profession. And now, after all my years, for the first time in my life I am ashamed to show my face in my own shop.’

‘ Now, now, now, Uncle Tom,’ Charlie said with his two hands in the air, ‘ there’s no use talking like that. The harm is done. The question is, What can we do about it ? ’

‘ Is it true, Charliss,’ his uncle asked oratorically, clutching the lapels of his coat and sinking his head in his chest, ‘ is it true that Peter took money that was entrusted to him ? ’

‘ Well, if it comes to that, Uncle Tom,’ said Charlie, ‘ I do it every month. But I put it back.’

‘ And is it true,’ asked his uncle, paying no attention to him, ‘ that he ran away from his punishment instead of standing his ground like a man ? ’

‘ And what good would that do him ? ’ asked Charlie reasonably.

‘ I dare say you’ll think I’m old-fashioned, Charliss,’ his uncle said firmly, ‘ but that wasn’t how I was reared, nor how my son was reared.’

‘ And that’s where I think you were wrong, Uncle Tom,’ said Charlie earnestly. ‘ He made some little mistake, like we all make, but instead of coming to somebody to help him out, he started gambling. Where is he ? ’

‘ I want to know nothing further about him, Charliss,’ said Tom. ‘ I believe he’s in the Air Force,’ he added, as if the words were dragged out of him. ‘ Under an assumed name. That’s what my son has fallen to, Charliss.’

‘ Good, good, good,’ said Charlie cheerfully. ‘ Now,

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I think the best thing we can do is to go into Asragh and see Toolan of the Guards. Maybe if the two of us got at the books together, we might make some fist of them.'

' Charliss,' his uncle said solemnly, pointing with his right arm at the door, ' will you believe me when I tell you that if Peter came in that door at this very minute and begged me on his knees to assist him, I'd send for the police.'

' And the police would send for me and have you locked up,' growled Charlie. ' I'll go down and talk to my old fellow. Anyway, he has a head on his shoulders.'

When he went back to the office, his father was sitting at the desk with his hands joined and his pipe in his mouth, looking at the door.

' Well ? ' he asked nervously.

' Come on and we'll get out the old bus and run into Asragh,' said Charlie. ' We'll have a look at the books ourselves.'

' And what the hell do you come to me for ? ' his father asked irritably, rising and kicking back his chair. ' What business is it of mine ? Can't his own father do it ? '

' The man is out of his senses,' said Charlie flatly. ' He's waltzing round the shop, singing solos about his wasted life.'

' Well,' his father said shortly, ' he was always fond of the drama. Now he has plenty of it.'

' He hasn't a stim of sense,' said Charlie.

' He has conceit enough,' said his father, striding up and down the office with his hands in his pockets. ' He was always good at criticising other people. Even when you got in here he was talking about influence. Of course, he wouldn't do a thing like that ! His son had to be a lawyer or a solicitor. Now look at the result.'

' We know all that,' said Charlie, ' but this isn't a time for raking up old scores.'

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'Who's raking up old scores?' his father asked, turning on him angrily. 'I'm only saying now what I always said. The boy was ruined.'

'He'll be ruined with a vengeance now unless we do something,' said Charlie. 'Are you coming to Asragh?'

'I am not,' snapped his father.

'Why not?' asked Charlie. 'You know there isn't much I can do unless one of ye gives me a hand.'

'I don't see why you should do anything at all,' shouted his father, glaring at him.

'That's right,' said Charlie. 'They'll hear you all over the bloody office.'

'Nobody will hear me at all,' his father said reasonably. 'I'm only speaking for your good. I'm at this business longer than you. A man that's done out of his money is a mad dog. You try and settle up another man's affairs, and you'll be the one to come in for the blame, not Peter at all.'

'I know that,' Charlie said, seeing the force of his father's argument; 'but still and all we should do something for Peter.'

'Well, his father is the proper person to do that.'

'But his father won't do it.'

'In that case, there's no call for you to meddle with it at all.'

A couple of days later Ben Lucey was going to his dinner. As bad as it was to get him back, it was harder still to get him away. First, he had to light a fresh pipe, and while he did that he leaned against the window, recollecting all the things he should have done during the morning. 'You were always a great man for telling other people what to do,' said Charlie as he pushed him out of the office. He hadn't been gone for five minutes before Charlie heard him coming back. He looked up in astonishment.

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‘What the blazes ails you?’ he asked with no great warmth.

His father closed the door of the office carefully behind him and spread his two hands on the desk, leaning across it.

‘Your uncle passed me just now in the Main Street,’ he said in a low voice.

‘That so?’ Charlie asked in surprise. ‘What did you do to him?’

‘I thought you might know that?’ his father said, looking at him from under the peak of the cap with a troubled air.

‘Unless ’twas something you said about Peter,’ said Charlie.

‘It might, it might,’ his father said doubtfully. ‘You didn’t, ah, repeat anything I said to you?’

‘I’m not such a bloody fool,’ said Charlie indignantly. ‘And indeed, I thought you had more sense. What did you say?’

‘Oh, nothing but what I said to you,’ said his father, and he went to the window, leaned his elbows on the sill and tapped nervously on the frame. ‘I shouldn’t have said anything at all, of course, but I didn’t think ’twould go back.’

‘I’m surprised at old Tom,’ said Charlie. ‘Usually, he cares little enough what anyone thinks of him.’

But even Charlie, who had moments when he almost understood his uncle, had no notion of the hopes he had raised and which his more calculating father had dashed.

3

It was a year later when Charlie went up to the shop again on another message, a harder one this time. The news was round the town already, for two men stopped him to enquire. When he went in the shop was empty;

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his uncle was standing with his back to the counter, looking up at the shelves with his spectacles down his nose.

'Good morning, Charliss,' he said over his shoulder in his dry, cheerful voice. 'And what's the best news?'

'Bad news, I'm afraid, Uncle Tom,' said Charlie, leaning across the counter towards him.

'Is it something about Peter, Charliss?' his uncle asked in a low voice, with the deep wrinkles showing up his cheeks from the primmed-up corners of his mouth.

'It is,' said Charlie, nodding dolefully.

'Dead, I suppose?' his uncle asked in a businesslike tone.

'I'm afraid so,' said Charlie.

'May the Almighty God have mercy on his soul,' his uncle said in a clear firm voice, and paused for a moment before he went to the back of the shop to change his working coat. 'You'd better close up the shop, Con,' he said from inside. 'You'll find the crepe on the top shelf and the mourning cards in my desk.' Then he came out with his umbrella hanging over his arm, and Charlie and himself went off down the street.

Charlie left him outside the door. He was going with his uncle to see about bringing home the body, so he had no chance of averting the scene that took place in the house. His father had arrived just after him and found Min in a state of collapse. He was the last man in the world to look after a woman, but he managed to get her a pillow, put her legs on a chair and covered her with a rug. She smelt of brandy. Then he strode up and down the darkened room with his cap over his eyes and his hands in his pockets. When his brother came in he started, took a step or two towards him and then paused uncertainly.

'That's terrible news, Tom,' he said with a baffled air.

'Oh, God help us,' said Min with her hand to her

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forehead. ‘They said he disgraced us, but he didn’t disgrace us long.’

‘Whisht, woman, whisht,’ said Ben in a shocked voice. He went up to his brother and raised his cap.

‘I’d sooner ’twas one of my own, Tom,’ he said excitedly. ‘As the Almighty God is listening to me this minute, I’d sooner it was. I’d still have a couple left, but he was all ye had. Aren’t you doing to shake hands with me?’

Tom looked at the hand and then at him and put his hands deliberately behind his back.

‘No, Ben,’ he said waspishly, ‘I am not.’

For a moment Ben gaped at him, not knowing what to say. He was a hot-tempered man.

‘I see,’ he said bitterly, ‘I see.’

‘Oh, Tom,’ cried Min with her crucified smile, ‘over your son’s dead body !’

‘That wasn’t the spirit I came in, Tom,’ Ben said with an offended air.

‘Ben,’ said his brother, taking a step towards him and squaring his frail little shoulders inside the black coat, ‘you disrespected my son while he was alive. Now that he’s dead I’d thank you to leave him alone.’

‘But, man alive,’ said Ben in exasperation, ‘don’t we all say things we’re sorry for? I admit I said things I shouldn’t have said. I was upset. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. You were upset yourself and I dare say you said things you’re sorry for.’

‘Tis hardly alike, Ben,’ said Tom in a rasping, opinionated tone. ‘I said them because I loved the boy. You said them because you hated him.’

‘I hated him?’ Ben cried indignantly. ‘I did nothing of the kind.’

‘You said he changed his name because it wasn’t grand enough for him,’ said Tom, clutching the lapels of his coat and stepping from one foot to the other.

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‘ Why did you say such a mean, cowardly thing about a boy in trouble ? ’

‘ But, my goodness,’ cried Ben, ‘ what was it only a joke ? ’

‘ You said you wouldn’t cross the road to help him,’ said Tom. ‘ And why, Ben ? ’ Again he primmed up the corners of his mouth and sank his head in his chest. ‘ I’ll tell you why. Because you were jealous of him.’

‘ I was jealous of him ? ’ Ben repeated incredulously.

‘ You were jealous of him, Ben,’ said Tom. ‘ You were jealous because he had the upbringing and the education your own sons lacked. And I’m not saying that to disparage your sons. Far from it. But you begrimed my son his advantages.’

‘ Never,’ shouted Ben in a rage.

‘ And I was harsh with him,’ Tom said, taking another step forward while his waspish little voice grew harder. ‘ I was harsh with him, and you were jealous of him, and he went to his grave without a hand to assist him. And now, Ben,’ he said, ‘ the least you can do is to spare us your commiserations.’

‘ Oh, I’ll spare them to you,’ said Ben angrily. ‘ I had no notion I’d get this reception or I wouldn’t have bothered.’

‘ Oh, wisha, Ben, don’t mind him,’ said Min. ‘ Sure, you never begrimed my poor child anything. He’s not in his right mind.’

‘ I hope not, Min,’ said Ben, trying to keep down the temper that was rising in him. ‘ I know he’s upset. Only for that he’d never say what he did say—or believe it.’

‘ You can tell me that the day I take your hand again, Ben,’ said Tom mockingly.

‘ Oh, it’s nothing to me,’ said Ben with a toss of his head. ‘ Do as you like, Tom.’ And he went out with his quick, hasty step and banged the door behind him.

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4

He was the world's worst patient. He was dying and didn't know it, and wouldn't go to hospital and broke his daughter's heart. He was awake at six, knocking for his cup of tea ; then he waited for the post, then for the paper. After that the day was a blank until nightfall when one or two old cronies dropped in to keep him company. There was nothing in the long low room, plastered with blue and green flowered wallpaper but a bedside table, a press, and three or four holy pictures, but Ben's mind was on the world outside ; on the newspaper and the office and the town. He couldn't believe he was so bad ; sometimes it was the doctor he blamed and sometimes the chemist didn't give him the same bottle as before. He lay in bed with pencil and paper doing involved calculations about the amount of a pension that everyone except himself knew he wouldn't live to draw.

One night Charlie and his wife came to see him. Charlie was married by this time and had a family of his own. He sat on the side of the bed trying to make conversation, but he could see that something else was on his father's mind.

' You weren't in at your uncle's ? ' he asked at last.

' I was,' said Charlie in surprise. ' We just dropped in on the way up. Why ? '

' He wasn't asking about me ? ' his father asked, looking at him out of the corner of his eye.

' Oh, he was,' Charlie said with a shocked air. ' Give him his due, he always does that.'

' He didn't say anything about coming to see me ? ' asked Ben.

' No,' Charlie replied hesitatingly, ' I can't say he did.'

' There's blackness for you now,' his father said bitterly. It came as a surprise to Charlie. His father

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knew well that he still visited his uncle, but pride had always kept him from asking questions. ‘The rest of the town will come to see me and my own brother won’t come to see me.’

‘He’s a queer man,’ Charlie admitted.

‘Tell me, Charlie, wouldn’t you have a word with him? He’s very attached to you?’

‘To tell you the God’s truth,’ said Charlie, ‘I’d just as soon not.’

‘Yes,’ said his father with disappointment, ‘I see that. I see it mightn’t do for you.’

Charlie knew his father thought he was thinking about what his uncle would leave to him. He wasn’t, but he preferred his father to go on thinking it.

‘I’ll tell Paddy go down tonight,’ he said.

‘Do,’ said his father with renewed hopefulness, raising himself on his elbow in the bed. ‘And you might call Julie up to me as well,’ he added.

‘Is it anything you want?’ asked Charlie.

‘A drop of whiskey and a couple of glasses,’ said his father with a wink. ‘I’d like to have something here when he comes. You’ll have a sup yourself?’ he added.

‘I won’t,’ said Charlie.

‘You will, you will,’ said his father with a toss of his head. ‘Julie will bring it up.’

When Charlie called in on his way home from dinner the next afternoon his two sisters were waiting for him in the hall, hysterical with excitement. His father was lying on his side with his back to the window. On the table were the bottle and glasses. His father turned his head slowly and saw who it was.

‘You’re not feeling too good?’ said Charlie, throwing himself over the end of the bed.

‘I’m not,’ his father said, lifting the sheet off his face.

‘Paddy didn’t bring a reply to that message?’ he asked.

‘Didn’t he?’ said Charlie in a shocked tone.

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‘Paddy was always a bad man to send on a message,’ his father said despondently, turning himself painfully in the bed. ‘Tell me, Charlie,’ he asked, ‘weren’t you there when I was talking about Peter?’

‘About Peter?’ exclaimed Charlie.

‘You were, you were,’ his father insisted. ‘Twas you told me. You said you were going to Asragh to look at the books and I just told you that if anything went wrong you’d come in for the blame. Isn’t that all I said?’

‘Oh, I know what you mean now,’ said Charlie.
‘You’re right, of course.’

‘I might have passed some joke about it, but sure, I was always making jokes about Tom, and Tom was always making jokes about me. What harm was there in that?’

‘No harm in the world,’ said Charlie.

‘Now, the way I look at that,’ said his father, ‘somebody went making mischief between us. That’s what happened, but if you went to him and told him the truth, he’d believe you.’

‘I will, I will,’ said Charlie. ‘I’ll go down now.’

Min opened the door to him, her red-rimmed eyes dirty with tears and a smell of brandy from her breath.

‘What way is he, Charlie?’ she wailed as she let him in.

‘Bad enough, Aunt Min,’ he said, wiping his boots on the mat and striding in the hall. ‘He won’t last the night, I’m afraid.’

‘I’m sorry to hear it, Charliss,’ said his uncle, drawing him into the sitting-room by the hand.

‘I know that well, Uncle Tom,’ said Charlie, resting the other hand on the old man’s shoulder. ‘You know what brought me?’ he added in a whisper.

‘I do, Charliss,’ said Tom, drawing himself up. They were neither of them men to beat about the bush.

‘You’ll come and see the last of him?’ Charlie said,

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looking at his uncle as if he was trying to hypnotise him.

'Charliss,' Tom said with that queer tightening of the corners of his mouth, 'I was never a man to hedge or procrastinate. I will not come.'

'Talk to him, Charlie, do,' cried Min, 'because I'm sick of talking to him. We'll never be able to show our faces in the town again.'

'I need hardly say, Charliss,' his uncle said tartly, 'that my reasons have nothing to do with what the town may think.'

'I know that,' said Charlie earnestly, still keeping his eyes fixed on the withered old face with the narrow-winged, almost transparent nose. 'But I never interfered between ye. Whatever disagreements ye had, I never took my father's part against you.'

'I'm not forgetting that, Charliss,' his uncle said equably.

'And you know,' said Charlie, laying his other hand on the old man's shoulders, 'you did this once before and regretted it. Are you going to make the same mistake with your brother that you made with your son?'

'I'm not forgetting that either, Charliss,' Tom said harshly. 'It isn't today nor yesterday I thought of it, but many years ago.'

'Your own brother,' said Charlie incredulously. 'He's lying there now, waiting for you. He waited for you all last night and you never came. He has the bottle of whiskey and the two glasses beside his bed. All he wants is for you to come and say you forgive him.'

'I forgive him, Charliss,' his uncle said in a cold, excited voice, throwing off his nephew's hands and stepping backwards from him towards the hearth. 'I forgive him. I forgave him long ago for what he said about one that was very dear to me. But I swore that day, Charliss, that never, the longest day I lived would I take your father's hand in friendship. And if God was to strike

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me down at this moment for my presumption, I'd say the same. You know me, Charliss,' he added, gripping the lapels of his coat. 'I never broke my word yet, to God or man. I won't do it now. . . . Do you understand me, Charliss?' he asked.

'I think I do, Uncle Tom,' Charlie said slowly.

'Oh, how can you say that?' cried Min. 'Even the wild beasts have more nature for their own.'

'Some other time,' said Tom, ignoring her, 'I'll ask you to forgive me.'

'I know, Uncle Tom, I know,' said Charlie with a heart-broken look.

But even then, he said after, he could bear no grudge against the old man. At the door he stopped. A queer feeling came over him. He remembered the day he had called with the pup, and he felt almost as though if he were to turn round he would see Peter standing behind him. But he was never much given to the supernatural. The real world was trouble enough for him, so he closed the door with a quick glance up and down the street and went home, praying that he might find the blinds drawn before him when he came.

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I

SPRING had only come and already he was tired to death ; tired of the city, tired of his job. He had come up from the country intending to do wonders, but he was as far as ever from that. He'd be lucky if he could carry on, be at school each morning at half-past nine and satisfy his half-witted principal.

He lodged in a small red-brick house in Rathmines that was kept by a middle-aged brother and sister who had been left a bit of money and thought they'd end their days enjoyably in a city. They didn't enjoy themselves ; regretted their little farm in Kerry and were glad of Ned Keating because he could talk to them about all the things they remembered and loved.

Keating was a slow, cumbrous young man with dark eyes and a dark cow's-lick that kept tumbling into them. He had a bit of a stammer, and ran his hand through his long limp hair from pure nervousness. He had always been dreamy and serious. Sometimes on market days you saw him standing for an hour in Nolan's shop, turning the pages of a school-book. When he couldn't afford it he put it back with a sigh and went off to find his old father in some pub, just raising his eyes to smile at Jack Nolan. After his elder brother Tom going for the Church, himself and his father had constant rows. Now nothing would do Ned only to be a teacher. Hadn't he all he wanted now ? his father asked. Hadn't he the place to himself ? What did he want going teaching ? But Ned was stubborn. With an obstinate, almost despairing determination he'd fought his way through the college into a city job. The city was what he had

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always wanted. And now the city had failed him. In the evenings you could still see him poking round the second-hand bookshops on the quays, but his eyes were already beginning to lose their eagerness.

It had all seemed so clear. But then he hadn't counted on his own temper. He was popular because of his gentleness, but how many concessions that involved ! He was hesitating, good-natured, slow to see guile, slow to contradict. He felt he was constantly under-estimating his own powers. He even felt he lacked spontaneity. He didn't drink, smoked little and saw dangers and losses everywhere. He blamed himself for avarice and cowardice. The story he liked best was about the country boy who was directed to a pillar-box. 'Indeed, what a fool you think I am ! Put me letter in a pump !'

He was in no danger of putting his letter in a pump or anywhere else for the matter of that. He had only one friend, a nurse in Vincent's Hospital ; a wild, light-hearted, light-headed girl. He was very fond of her and supposed that some day when he had money enough he'd ask her to marry him ; but not yet, and at the same time something that was both shyness and caution kept him from committing himself too far. Sometimes he planned excursions besides the usual weekly walk or visit to the pictures, but somehow they seldom came to anything.

He no longer knew why he had come to the city, but it wasn't for the sake of the bed-sitting-room in Rathmines, the oblong of dusty garden outside the window, the trams clanging up and down, the shelf full of second-hand books or the occasional visit to the pictures. Half humorously, half despairingly he'd clutch his head in his hands and admit that he hadn't the foggiest notion of what he wanted. He would have liked to leave it all and gone to Glasgow or New York as a labourer, not because he was romantic, but because he

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felt that only when he had to work with his hands for a living and wasn't sure of his bed would he find out what all his ideals and emotions meant and where he could fit them in to the scheme of his life.

But no sooner did he set out for school next morning, striding slowly along the edge of the canal, watching the trees become green again and the tall claret-coloured houses painted on the quiet surface of the water, than all his fancies took flight. Put his letter in a pump indeed ! He'd continue to be submissive and draw his salary and wonder how much he could save and when he'd be able to buy a little house to bring his girl into ; a nice thing to think of on a spring morning ; a house of his own and a wife in the bed beside him. And his nature would continue to contract about him ; every ideal, every generous impulse another mesh to draw his head down tighter to his knees till in ten years' time it would tie him hand and foot.

2

Tom, who was a curate in Wicklow, wrote and suggested that they might go home together for the long week-end, and on Saturday morning they set out in Tom's old Ford. It was Easter weather, pearly and cold. They stopped at several pubs on the way and Tom ordered whiskeys. Ned was feeling expansive and joined him. He had never quite got used to his brother, partly because of old days when he felt that Tom was getting the education he should have got ; partly because his ordination seemed to have shut him off from the rest of the family, and now it was as though he were trying to surmount it by his boisterous manner and affected bonhomie. He was like a man shouting to his comrades across a great distance. He was different from Ned ; lighter in colour of hair and skin ; fat-headed,

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fresh-complexioned, deep-voiced and autocratic ; an irascible, humorous, friendly man who was well liked by those he worked for. Ned, who was shy and all tied up within himself, envied him his way with men in garages and barmaids in hotels.

It was nightfall when they reached home. Their father was in his shirt-sleeves at the gate, waiting to greet them, and immediately their mother rushed out as well. The lamp was standing in the window and threw its light as far as the whitewashed gateposts. Little Brigid, the girl from up the hill, who helped their mother now she was growing old, stood in the doorway in half silhouette. When her eyes caught theirs she bent her head in confusion.

Nothing was changed in the tall, bare, whitewashed kitchen. The harness hung in the same place on the wall, the rosary on the same nail in the fireplace by the stool where their mother usually sat ; table under the window, churn against the back door, stair without banisters mounting straight to the attic door that yawned in the wall — all seemed as unchanging as the sea outside. Their mother sat on the stool, her hands on her knees, a coloured shawl tied tightly about her head, like a gipsy woman with her battered yellow face and loud voice. Their father, fresh-complexioned like Tom ; stocky and broken-bottomed, gazed out the front door, leaning with one hand on the dresser in the pose of an orator while Brigid made the tea.

' I said ye'd be late,' their father proclaimed triumphantly, twisting his moustache. ' Didn't I, woman ? Didn't I say they'd be late ? '

' He did, he did,' their mother assured them. ' 'Tis true for him.'

' Ah, I knew ye'd be making halts. But damn it, if I wasn't put astray by Thade Lahy's car going east.'

' And was that Thade Lahy's car ? ' their mother asked in a shocked tone.

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'I told ye 'twas Thade Lahy's,' piped Brigid, plopping about in her long frieze gown and bare feet.

'Sure, I should know it, woman,' old Tomas said with chagrin. 'He must have gone into town without us noticing him.'

'Oye, and how did he do that?' asked their mother.

'Leave me alone now,' Tomas said despairingly, 'I couldn't tell you, I could not tell you.'

'My goodness, I was sure that was the Master's car,' the mother said wonderingly, pulling distractedly at the tassels of her shawl.

'I'd know the rattle of Thade Lahy's car anywhere,' little Brigid said, very proudly and quite unregarded.

It seemed to Ned that he was interrupting a conversation that had been going on since his last visit, and that the road outside and the sea beyond it, and every living thing that passed before them, formed a pantomime that was watched endlessly and passionately from the darkness of the little cottage.

'Wisha, I never asked if ye'd like a drop of something,' their father said with sudden vexation.

'Is it whiskey?' boomed Tom.

'Why? Would you sooner whiskey?'

'Can't you pour it out first and ask us after?' growled Tom.

'The whiskey, is it?'

'Tis not. I didn't come all the ways to this place for what I can get better at home. You'd better have a bottle ready for me to take back.'

'Coleen will have it. Damn it, wasn't it only last night I said to Coleen that you'd likely want a bottle? Some way it struck me you would. Oh, he'll have it, he'll have it.'

'Didn't they catch that string of misery yet?' asked Tom with the cup to his lips.

'Ah, man alive, you'd want to be a greyhound to

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catch him. God Almighty, hadn't they fifty police after him last November, scouring the mountains from one end to the other, and all they caught was a glimpse of the white of his arse. Ah, but the priest preached a terrible sermon against him — by name, Tom, by name ! '

' Is old Fahy blowing about it still ? ' growled Tom.

' Oh, let me alone now ! ' Tomas threw his hands to Heaven and strode to and fro in his excitement, his bucket-bottom wagging. Ned knew to his sorrow that his father could be prudent, silent and calculating ; he knew only too well the cock of the head, the narrowing of the eyes. But like a child, the old man loved innocent excitement and revelled in scenes of the wildest passion, all about nothing. Like an old actor he turned everything to drama. ' The like of it for abuse was never heard, never heard, never heard ! How Coleen could ever raise his head again after it ! And where the man got the words from ! Tom, my treasure, my son, you'll never have the like.'

' I'd spare my breath to cool my porridge,' Tom replied ironically. ' I dare say you gave up your own still so ? '

' Ah, I didn't, Tom, I didn't. The drop I make, 'twould harm no one. Only a drop for Christmas and Easter.'

The lamp was in its own place on the rere wall and made a circle of brightness on the fresh lime-wash. Their mother was leaning over the fire with joined hands, lost in thought. The front door was open and night thickening outside, the coloured night of the west ; and as they ate their father walked to and fro in long ungainly strides, pausing each time at the door to give a glance up and down the road and at the fire to hoist his broken bottom to warm. Ned heard steps come up the road from the west. His father heard them too. He returned to the door and glued his hand to the jamb. Ned covered his

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eyes with his hands and felt that everything was as it had always been. He could hear the noise of the strand as a background to the voices.

‘God be with you, Tomas,’ the voice said.

‘God and Mary be with you, Teig.’ (In Irish they were speaking.) ‘What way are you?’

‘Well, honour and praise be to God. ’Tis a fine night.’

‘ ’Tis, ’tis, ’tis so, indeed. A grand night, praise be to God.’

‘Musha, who is it?’ their mother asked, looking round.

‘ ’Tis young Teig,’ their father replied, looking after him.

‘Shemus’s young Teig?’ she asked.

‘ ’Tis, ’tis, ’tis.’

‘But where would Shemus’s young Teig be going at this hour of night? ’Tisn’t to the shop?’

‘No, woman, no, no, no. Up to the uncle’s, I suppose.’

‘Is it Ned Willie’s?’

‘He’s sleeping at Ned Willie’s,’ Brigid chimed in in her high-pitched voice, timid but triumphant. ‘ ’Tis since the young teacher came to them.’

There was no more to be said. Everything was explained, and Ned smiled. The only unfamiliar voice, little Brigid’s, seemed the most familiar of all.

3

Tom said first Mass next morning, and the household, all but Brigid, went. They drove, and Tomas in high glee sat in front with Tom, waving his hand and shouting greetings to all they met. He was like a boy, so intense was his pleasure. The chapel was perched high above the road. Outside, the morning was grey, and beyond the windy edge of the hill was the sea. The wind blew straight in, setting cloaks and petticoats flying.

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After dinner, as the two boys were returning from a series of visits to the neighbours' houses, their father rushed down the road to meet them, shaking them passionately by the hand and asking were they well. When they were seated in the kitchen he opened up the subject of his excitement.

'Well,' he said, 'I arranged a grand little outing for ye tomorrow, thanks be to God,' and to identify further the source of his inspiration, he searched at the back of his neck for the peak of his cap and raised it solemnly.

'Musha, what outing are you talking about?' their mother asked angrily.

'I arranged for us to go over the bay to your brother's.'

'And can't you leave the poor boys alone?' bawled his wife. 'Haven't they only the one day? Isn't it for the rest they came?'

'Even so, even so, even so,' Tomas said with mounting passion. 'Aren't their own cousins to lay eyes on them?'

'I was in Carriganassa for a week last summer,' said Tom.

'Yes, but I wasn't, and Ned wasn't. 'Tis only decent.'

'Tisn't decency is worrying you at all, but drink,' growled Tom.

'Oh!' gasped his father, fishing for the peak of his cap to swear by, 'that I might be struck dead!'

'Be quiet, you old heathen!' crowed his wife. 'That's the truth, Tom, my pulse. Plenty of drink is what he wants, where he won't be under my eye. Leave ye stop at home.'

'I can't stop at home, woman,' shouted Tomas. 'Why do you be always picking at me. I must go, whether they come or not. I must go, I must go, and that's all there is about it.'

'Why must you?' asked his wife.

'Because I warned Red Pat and Dempsey,' he stormed.

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' And the woman from the island is coming as well to see a daughter of hers that's married there. And what's more I borrowed Cassidy's boat and he lent it at great inconvenience, and 'twould be very bad manners for me to throw his kindness back in his face. I must go.'

' Oh, we may as well all go,' said Tom.

It blew hard all night, and Tomas, all anxiety, was out at break of day, to watch the white caps on the water. While the boys were at breakfast he came in, and leaning his two arms on the table with his hands joined as though in prayer, he announced in a caressing voice that it was a beautiful day, thank God ; a pet day with a moist, gentle little bit of a breezheen that would only blow them over. His voice would have put a child to sleep, but his wife continued to nag and scold, and Tomas stumped out again in a fury and sat on the wall with his back to the house and his legs crossed, chewing his pipe. He was dressed in his best clothes ; a respectable blue tail-coat and pale frieze trousers with only one patch on the seat of it. He had turned his cap almost right way round so that the peak covered his right ear.

He was all over the boat like a boy. Dempsey, a haggard, pock-marked, melancholy man with a soprano voice of astounding penetration, took the tiller and Red Patrick the sail. Tomas clambered into the bows and stood there with one knee up, leaning forward like a figure-head. He knew the bay like a book. The island woman was perched on the ballast with her rosary in her hands and her shawl over her eyes, to shut out the sight of the waves. The cumbrous old boat took the sail lightly enough, and Ned leaned back on his elbows against the side, rejoicing in it all.

' She's laughing,' his father said delightedly when her bows ran white.

' Whose boat is that, Dempsey ? ' he asked, screwing up his eyes as another brown sail tilted ahead of them.

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‘ ‘Tis the island boat,’ shrieked Dempsey.

‘ ‘Tis not, Dempsey. ‘Tis not indeed, my love. That’s not the island boat.’

‘ Whose boat is it then ? ’

‘ It must be some boat from Carriganassa, Dempsey.’

‘ ‘Tis the island boat, I tell you.’

‘ Ah, why will you be contradicting me, Dempsey, my treasure ? ’Tis not the island boat. The island boat has a dark-brown sail ; ‘tis only a month since ‘twas tarred, and that’s an old tarred sail, and what proves it out and out, Dempsey, the island boat sail has a patch in the corner.’

He was leaning well over the bows, watching the rocks that fled beneath them, a dark purple. He rested his elbow on his raised knee and looked back at them, his brown face sprinkled with spray and lit from below by the accumulated flickerings of the water. His flesh seemed to dissolve, to become transparent while his blue eyes shone with extraordinary brilliance. Ned half closed his eyes and watched sea and sky slowly mount and sink behind the red-brown, sun-filled sail and the poised and eager figure.

‘ Tom ! ’ shouted his father, and the battered old face peered at them from under the arch of the sail with which it was almost one in tone, the silvery light filling it with warmth.

‘ Well ? ’ Tom’s voice was an inexpressive boom.

‘ You were right last night, Tom, my boy. My treasure, my son, you were right. ‘Twas for the drink I came.’

‘ Ah, do you tell me so ? ’ Tom asked ironically.

‘ ‘Twas, ‘twas, ‘twas,’ the old man said, regretfully.

‘ ‘Twas for the drink. ‘Twas so, my darling. They were always decent people, your mother’s people, and ‘tis her knowing how decent they are makes her so suspicious. She’s a good woman, a fine woman, your poor mother,

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may the Almighty God bless her and keep her and watch over her.'

'Aaaa-men,' Tom chanted irreverently, as his father shook his old cap piously towards the sky.

'But, Tom ! Are you listening, Tom ?'

'Well, what is it now ?'

'I had another reason.'

'Had you, indeed ?' Tom's tone wasn't encouraging.

'I had, I had. God's truth, I had. God blast the lie I'm telling you, Tom ! I had.'

'Twas boasting out of the pair of ye,' shrieked Dempsey from the stern, the wind whipping the shrill notes from his lips and scattering them wildly like scraps of paper.

'Twas so, Dempsey, 'twas so. You're right, Dempsey. You're always right. The blessing of God on you, Dempsey, for you always had the true word.' Tomas's laughing leprechaun countenance gleamed under the bellying, tilting, chocolate-coloured sail and his powerful voice beat Dempsey's down. 'And would you blame me ?'

'The O'Donnells hadn't the beating of them in their own hand,' screamed Dempsey.

'Thanks be to God for all His goodness and mercy,' shouted Tomas, again waving his cap in a gesture of recognition towards the spot where he felt the Almighty might be listening. 'They have not. They have not so, Dempsey. And they have a good hand. The O'Donnells are a good family and an old family and a kind family, but they never had the like of my two sons.'

'And they were stiff enough with you when you came for the daughter,' shrieked Dempsey.

'They were, Dempsey, they were. They were stiff. They were so. You wouldn't blame them, Dempsey. They were an old family and I was nothing only a landless man.' With a fierce gesture the old man pulled his cap still further over his ear, spat, gave his moustache a

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tug, and leaned at a still more precarious angle over the bow, his blue eyes dancing with triumph. ‘But I had the gumption, Dempsey. I had the gumption, my love.’

The islands slipped past ; the gulf of water narrowed and grew calmer, and white cottages could be seen scattered under the tall ungainly church. It was a wild and rugged coast, the tide was full, and they had to pull in as best they could among the rocks. Red Patrick leaped lightly ashore to draw in the boat. The others stepped after him into several inches of water, and Red Patrick, himself precariously poised, held them from slipping. Rather shamefastly, Ned and Tom took off their shoes.

‘Don’t do that !’ shrieked their father. ‘We’ll carry ye up. Mother of God, yeer poor feet !’

‘Will you shut your ould gob ?’ Tom said angrily.

They halted for a moment at the stile outside Caheragh’s. Old Caheragh had a red beard and a broad smiling face. Then they went on to O’Donnell’s who had two houses, modern and old, separated by a yard. In one lived Uncle Maurice and his family, and in the other Maurice’s married son, Sean. Ned and Tom stayed with Sean and his wife. Tom and he were old friends. When he spoke he rarely looked at Tom, merely gave him a sidelong glance that just reached to his chin and then dropped his eyes with a peculiar timid smile. ‘ ’Twas,’ Ned heard him say, and then ‘He did,’ and after that ‘hardly.’ Shuvaun was tall, nervous and matronly. She clung to their hands with an excess of eagerness as though she couldn’t bear to let them go, uttering ejaculations of tenderness, delight, astonishment, pity and admiration. Her speech was full of diminutives : ‘childeen,’ ‘handeen,’ ‘boateen.’ Three young children scrambled about the floor with a preoccupation scarcely broken by the strangers. Shuvaun picked her way through them, filling the kettle, cutting the bread, and then as though afraid of neglecting Tom, she clutched his hand

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again. Her feverish concentration gave an impression that its very intensity bewildered her, and made it impossible for her to understand one word they said. In three days' time it would all begin to drop into place in her mind and then she would begin quoting them.

Young Niall O'Donnell came in with his girl ; one of the Deignans from up the hill. She was plump and pert ; she had been in service in town. Niall was a well-built boy with a soft, wild-eyed sensuous face and a deep mellow voice of great power. While they were having a cup of tea in the bare parlour where the three or four family photos were skied, Ned saw the two of them again, through the back window. They were standing on the high ground behind the house with the spring sky behind them and the light in their faces. Niall was asking her something, but she, more interested in the sitting-room window, only shook her head.

'Ye only just missed yeer father,' said their Uncle Maurice when they went across to the other house for dinner. Maurice was a tight-lipped little man with a high bald forehead and a dry snappy voice. 'He went off to Owney Pat's only this minute.'

'The devil !' said Tom. 'I knew he was out to dodge me. Did you give him whiskey ?'

'What the hell else could I give him ?' snapped Maurice. 'Do you think 'twas tea the old coot was looking for ?'

Tom took the place of honour at the table. He was the favourite. Through the doorway into the bedroom could be seen a big canopy bed and on the whiteness of a raised pillow a skeleton face in a halo of smoke-blue hair surmounted with what looked suspiciously like a mauve tea-cosy. Sometimes the white head would begin to stir and everyone fell silent while Niall, the old man's pet, translated the scarcely audible whisper. Sometimes Niall would go in with his stiff ungainly swagger and

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repeat one of Tom's jokes in his drawling, powerful bass. The hens stepped daintily about their feet, poking officious heads between them and rushing out the door with a wild flutter and shriek when one of the girls hooshed them. Something timeless, patriarchal and restful about it made Ned notice everything. It was as though he had never seen his mother's house before.

'Tell me,' Tom boomed with mock concern, leaning over confidentially to his uncle and looking under his brows at young Niall, 'speaking as a clergyman, and for the good of the family and so on, is that son of yours cooing Delia Deignan ?'

'Why? Was the young blackguard along with her again?' snapped Maurice in amusement.

'Of course I might be mistaken,' Tom said doubtfully.

'You wouldn't know a Deignan, to be sure,' said Sean.

'Isn't any of them married yet?' asked Tom.

'No, by damn, no,' said Maurice. 'Isn't it a wonder?'

'Because,' said Tom in the same solemn voice, 'I want someone to look after this young brother of mine. Dublin is a wild sort of place and full of temptations. Ye wouldn't know a decent little girl I could ask?'

'Cait! Cait!' they all shouted, Niall's deep voice loudest of all.

'Now, all the same,' Tom said, 'Delia looks a smart little piece.'

'No, Cait, Cait! Delia isn't the same since she went to town. She has notions of herself. Leave him marry Cait!'

Niall rose gleefully and shambled into the old man. With a gamesome eye on the company, Tom whispered :

'Is she a quiet sort of girl? I wouldn't like him to get anyone rough.'

'She is, she is,' they said, 'a grand girl!'

Sean rose quietly and went to the door with his head down.

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' God knows, if anyone knows he should, and all the times he man-handled her.'

Tom sat bolt upright with mock indignation while the table rocked. Niall shouted the joke into his grandfather's ear. The mauve tea-cosy shook ; it was the only indication of the old man's amusement.

4

The Deignans' house was on top of a hill high over the road and commanded a view of the countryside for miles. The two brothers with Sean and the O'Donnell girls reached it by a long winding boreen that threaded its way uncertainly through little grey rocky fields and walls of unmortared stone which rose against the sky along the edges of the hill like lace-work. On their way they met another procession coming down the hill. It was headed by their father and the island woman, arm in arm, and behind came two locals with Dempsey and Red Patrick. All the party except the island woman were well advanced in liquor. That was plain when their father rushed forward to shake them all by the hand and ask them how they were. He said that civil such honourable and kindly people as the people of Carriganassa were to be found in the whole world, and of these there was no one a patch on the O'Donnells ; kings and sons of kings, as you could see from one look at them. He had only one more call to pay and promised to be at the Caheraghs' within a quarter of an hour.

They looked over the Deignans' half door. The kitchen was empty. The girls began to titter. They knew the Deignans had watched them coming from Maurice's door. The kitchen was a beautiful room, woodwork and furniture, home-made and shapely, were painted a bright red-brown and the painted dresser shone with pretty ware. They entered and looked about them. Nothing

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was to be heard but the tick of the cheap alarm clock on the dresser. One of the girls began to giggle hysterically. Sean raised his voice.

‘Are ye in or are ye out, bad cess to ye?’

For a moment there was no reply. Then a quick step sounded in the attic, and a girl descended the stairs at a run, drawing a black knitted shawl tighter about her shoulders. She was perhaps twenty-eight or thirty with a narrow face, sharp like a ferret’s, and blue nervous eyes. She entered the kitchen awkwardly sideways, giving the customary greetings but without looking at anyone.

‘A hundred welcomes. . . . How are ye? . . . ’Tis a fine day.’

The O’Donnell girls giggled again. Nora Deignan looked at them in astonishment, biting nervously at the tassel of her shawl. She had tiny, sharp white teeth.

‘What is it, aru?’ she asked.

‘Musha, will you stop your old kimeens,’ boomed Tom, ‘and tell us where’s Cait from you? You don’t think ’twas to see your ugly puss that we came up here?’

‘Cait!’ Nora called in a low voice.

‘What is it?’ another voice replied from upstairs.

‘Damn well you know what it is,’ bellowed Tom, ‘and you cross-eyed expecting us since morning. Will you come down out of that or will I go up and fetch you?’

There was the same hasty step and a second girl descended the stairs. It was only later that Ned was able to realise how beautiful she was. She had the same narrow pointed face as her sister, the same slight features sharpened by a sort of animal instinct, the same blue eyes with their startled brightness; but all seemed to have been differently composed and her complexion had a transparency as though her whole nature were shining through it. ‘Child of Light, thy limbs are burning through the veil which seems to hide them,’ Ned found

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himself murmuring. She came upon them in the same hostile way, blushing furiously. Tom's eyes rested on her ; soft, bleary, emotional eyes, incredibly unlike her own.

' Have you nothing to say to me, Cait ? ' he boomed, and Ned thought his very voice was soft and clouded.

' Oh, a hundred welcomes.' Her blue eyes rested for a moment on him with what seemed a fierce candour and penetration and went past him to the open door. Outside a soft rain was beginning to fall ; heavy clouds crushed down the grey landscape which grew clearer as it merged into one common plane ; the little grey bumpy fields with the walls of grey unmortared stone that drifted hither and over across them like blown sand ; the whitewashed farmhouses lost to the sun sinking back into the brown-grey hillsides.

' Nothing else, my child ? ' he growled, pursing his fat mouth.

' How are you ? '

' The politeness is suffocating you. Where's Delia ? '

' Here I am,' said Delia from the doorway immediately behind him. She had slunk round the house in her furtive way. Her bland impertinence raised a laugh.

' The reason we called,' said Tom, clearing his throat, ' is this young brother of mine who's looking for a wife.'

Everyone laughed again. Ned knew the oftener a joke was repeated, the better they liked it, but for him this particular joke was beginning to wear thin.

' Leave him take me,' said Delia with an arch look at Ned, who smiled and looked at the floor.

' Be quiet, you slut ! ' said Tom. ' There are your two sisters before you.'

' Even so, I want to go to Dublin. . . . Would you treat me to lemonade, mister ? ' she asked Ned with her impudent smile. ' This is a rotten hole. I'd go to America if they left me.'

' America won't be complete without you,' growled

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Tom. ‘Now, don’t leave me hurry ye, ladies, but my old fellow will be waiting for us in Johnny Kit’s.’

‘We’ll go along with you,’ said Nora, and the three girls took down three black shawls from inside the door. Some tension seemed to have gone out of the air. They laughed and joked between themselves.

‘Ye’ll get wet,’ said Sean to the two brothers.

‘Cait will make room for me under her shawl,’ said Tom.

‘Indeed I will not,’ she cried, starting back with a laugh.

‘Very shy you’re getting,’ said Sean with a good-natured grin.

‘Tisn’t that at all but she’d sooner the young man,’ said Delia.

‘What’s strange is wonderful,’ said Nora.

Biting her lip with her tiny front teeth, Cait looked angrily at her sisters and Sean, and then began to laugh. She glanced at Ned and smilingly held out her shawl in invitation, though at the same moment angry blushes chased one another across her forehead like squalls across the surface of a lake. The rain was a mild, persistent drizzle and a strong wind was blowing. Everything had darkened and grown lonely, and with his head in the blinding folds of the shawl which reeked of turf-smoke and his arm about Cait, Ned felt as if he had dropped out of Time’s pocket.

They waited in Caheragh’s kitchen. The bearded old man sat in one chimney corner and a little barelegged boy in the other. The dim blue light poured down the wide chimney on their heads in a shower, with the delicacy of light on old China, picking out surfaces one rarely saw, and between them the fire burned a bright orange in the great whitewashed hearth with the black swinging bars and pothook. Outside the rain fell softly, almost soundlessly, beyond the half door. Delia, her

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black shawl trailing from her shoulders, leaned across it, acting the part of watcher as in a Greek play. Their father's fifteen minutes strung themselves out to an hour, and two little barefooted boys had already been sent off to hunt him down.

'Where are they now, Delia?' one of the O'Donnells would ask.

'Crossing the fields from Patsy Kit's.'

'He wasn't there so.'

'He wouldn't be,' the old man said. 'They'll likely go on to Ned Kit's now.'

'That's where they're making for,' said Delia. 'Up the hill at the far side of the fort.'

'They'll find him there,' the old man said confidently.

Ned felt as though he were still blanketed by the folds of the turf-reeking shawl. Something seemed to have descended on him that filled him with passion and loneliness. He could scarcely take his eyes off Cait. She and Nora sat on the form against the back wall, a composition in black and white, the black shawl drawn tight under her chin, the cowl of it breaking the curve of her dark hair, her shadow on the gleaming wall behind. She didn't speak except to answer some question of Tom's about her brother, but sometimes Ned caught her looking at him with naked eyes. Then she smiled swiftly and secretly, and turned her eyes again to the door, sinking back into pensiveness. Pensiveness or vacancy? he wondered. While he gazed at her face with the animal instinctiveness of its over-delicate features, it seemed like a mirror in which he saw again the falling rain, the rocks and hills and angry sea.

The first announced by Delia was Red Patrick. After him came the island woman. Each had last seen his father in a different place. Ned chuckled at a sudden vision of his father, eager and impassioned and aflame with drink, stumping with his broken bottom across

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endless fields through pouring rain with a growing procession behind him. Dempsey was the last to come. He doubted if Tomas would be in a condition to take the boat at all.

‘ What matter, aru ? ’ said Delia across her shoulder.
‘ We can find room for the young man.’

‘ And where would we put him ? ’ gaped Nora.

‘ He can have Cait’s bed,’ Delia said innocently.

‘ Oye, and where would Cait sleep ? ’ Nora asked, and then skitted and covered her face with her shawl. Delia scoffed. The men laughed, and Cait, biting her lip furiously looked at the floor. Again Ned caught her eyes on him, and again she laughed and turned away.

Tomas burst in unexpected on them all like a sea-wind that scattered them before him. He wrung Tom’s hand and asked him how he was. He did the same to Ned. Ned replied gravely that he was very well.

‘ In God’s holy name,’ cried his father, waving his arms like a windmill, ‘ what are ye all waiting for ? ’

The tide had fallen. Tomas grabbed an oar and pushed the boat on to a rock. Then he raised the sail and collapsed under it and had to be extricated from under its drenching folds, glauming and swearing at Cassidy’s old boat. A little group stood on a naked rock against a grey background of drifting rain. For a long time Ned continued to wave back to the black shawl that was lifted to him. An extraordinary feeling of exultation and loss descended on him. Huddled up in his overcoat he sat with Dempsey in the stern, not speaking.

‘ It was a grand day,’ his father declared, swinging himself to and fro, tugging at his Viking moustache, dragging the peak of his cap farther over his ear. His gestures betrayed a certain lack of rhythmical cohesion ; they began and ended abruptly. ‘ Dempsey, my darling, wasn’t it a grand day ? ’

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‘ ‘Twas a grand day for you,’ shrieked Dempsey as if his throat would burst.

‘ ‘Twas, my treasure, ‘twas a beautiful day. I got an honourable reception and my sons got an honourable reception.’

By this time he was flat on his belly, one leg completely over the edge of the boat. He reached back a clammy hand to his sons.

‘ ‘Twas the best day I ever had,’ he said. ‘ I got porter and I got whiskey and I got poteen. I did so, Tom, my calf. Ned, my brightness, I went to seven houses and in every house I got seven drinks and with every drink I got seven welcomes. And your mother’s people are a hand of trumps. It was no slight they put on me at all even if I was nothing but a landless man. No slight, Tom, no slight at all.’

Darkness had fallen, the rain had cleared, the stars came out of a pitch-black sky under which the little tossing, nosing boat seemed lost beyond measure. In all the waste of water nothing could be heard but the splash of the boat’s sides and their father’s voice raised in tipsy song :

‘ *The evening was fair and the sunlight was yellow,
I halted, beholding a maiden bright,
Coming to me by the edge of the mountain,
Her cheeks had a berry-bright, rosy light.*’

5

Ned was the first to wake. He struck a match and lit the candle. It was time for them to be stirring. It was just after dawn, and at half-past nine he must be in his old place in the schoolroom before the rows of pinched little city faces. He lit a cigarette and closed his eyes. The lurch of the boat was still in his blood, the face of Cait Deignan in his mind, and as if from far

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away he heard a line of the wild love-song his father had been singing : ‘ And we’ll drive the geese at the fall of night.’

He heard his brother mumble something and nudged him. Tom looked big and fat and helpless with his fair head rolled sideways and his heavy mouth dribbling on to the sleeve of his pyjamas. Ned slipped out of bed quietly, put on his trousers and went to the window. He drew the curtains and let in the thin cold daylight. The bay was just visible and perfectly still. Tom began to mumble again in a frightened voice and Ned shook him awake. He started out of his sleep with a cry of fear, grabbing at the bed-clothes. He looked first at Ned, then at the candle, and drowsily rubbed his eyes.

‘ Did you hear it too ? ’ he asked.

‘ Did I hear what ? ’ asked Ned with a smile.

‘ The thing in the room,’ replied Tom from his dream.

‘ There was nothing in the room,’ said Ned. ‘ You were ramaishing, so I woke you up.’

‘ Was I ? ’ asked Tom. ‘ What was I saying ? ’

‘ You were telling no secrets,’ said Ned with his quiet laugh.

‘ Hell,’ Tom said in disgust, and stretched out his arm for a cigarette. He lit it at the candle-flame, his drowsy red face puckered and distraught. ‘ I slept rotten.’

‘ Oye,’ Ned said quietly, raising his eyebrows. It wasn’t often Tom spoke in that tone. He sat on the edge of the bed, joined his hands and leaned forward, looking at Tom with wide gentle eyes. ‘ Is there anything wrong ? ’

‘ Plenty,’ said Tom.

‘ You’re not in trouble ? ’ Ned asked without raising his voice.

‘ Not that sort of trouble. The trouble is in myself.’

Ned gave him a look of intense sympathy and under-

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standing. The soft emotional brown eyes were searching him for a judgment. Ned had never felt less like judging him.

'Ay,' he said gently, vaguely, his eyes wandering to the other side of the room while his voice took on its accustomed stammer, 'the trouble is always in ourselves. If we were contented in ourselves the other things wouldn't matter. I suppose we must only leave it to Time. Time settles everything.'

'Time will settle nothing for me,' Tom said despairingly. 'You have something to look forward to. I have nothing. It's the loneliness of my job that kills you. Even to talk about it would be a relief, but there's no one you can talk to. People come to you with their troubles, but there's no one you can go to with your own.'

Again the challenging glare in the brown eyes, and Ned realised with infinite compassion that for years Tom had been living in the same state of suspicion and fear, a man being hunted down by his own nature ; and that for years to come he would continue to live in this way, and perhaps never be caught again as he was now.

'A pity you came down here at all,' stammered Ned flatly. 'A pity we went to Carriganassa at all. 'Twould be better for both of us if we went somewhere else.'

'Why don't you marry her, Ned?' Tom asked earnestly.

'Who?' asked Ned.

'Cait.'

'Yesterday,' said Ned with the shy smile he had whenever he said something he'd thought over, 'I nearly wished I could.'

'But you can, man,' Tom said eagerly, sitting up on his elbow. Like all men, with frustration in his heart he was full of schemes for others. 'You could marry her and get a school down here. That's what I'd do if I was in your place.'

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'No,' Ned said gravely. 'We made our choice a long time ago. We can't go back on it now.'

Then with his hands in his trousers pockets and his head bowed he went out to the kitchen. His mother, the coloured shawl about her head, was blowing the fire. The bedroom door was open and he could see his father in shirt-sleeves kneeling beside the bed, his face raised reverently towards a holy picture, his braces hanging down behind. He unbolted the half door, went through the garden and out on to the road. There was a magical light on everything. A boy on a horse rose suddenly against the sky, a startling picture. Through the apple-green light over Carriganassa ran long streaks of crimson, so still they might have been enamelled. Magic, magic, magic ! He saw it as in a children's picture-book with all its colours intolerably bright ; something he had outgrown and could never return to, while the world he aspired to was as remote and intangible as it had seemed even in the despair of youth.

It seemed as if only now for the first time was he leaving home ; for the first time and for ever saying goodbye to it all.

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I

THE first time Ned Lowry met her was when he was fourteen and she the same or maybe a year or two younger. It was on the North Mall on a Saturday afternoon, and she was sitting on a bench under the trees, a tall, bony string of a girl with a long obstinate jaw. Ned was a studious young fellow in a blue-and-white college cap, thin and pale and spectacled. As he passed he looked at her owlishly and she gave him back an impudent stare. That upset him — he had no experience of girls — so he blushed and raised his cap. At that she seemed to relent.

‘ Hallo,’ she said experimentally.

‘ Good evening,’ said Ned with a pale smile.

‘ Where are you off to ?’ she asked.

‘ Oh, just up the Dyke for a walk,’ said Ned.

‘ Sit down,’ she said in a sharp voice, laying her hand on the bench beside her, and he did as he was told. It was a lovely summer evening, and the white quay walls and tall, crazy, claret-coloured tenements under a blue-and-white sky were reflected in the lazy water that wrinkled only at the edges and seemed like a painted carpet.

‘ It’s very pleasant here,’ he said wistfully.

‘ Is it ?’ she asked with a truculence that startled him.

‘ I don’t see anything very pleasant about it.’

‘ Oh, it’s very nice and quiet,’ he said in mild surprise as he raised his fair eyebrows and looked up and down the Mall at the old Georgian houses and the nursemaids sitting under the trees. ‘ My name,’ he added politely, ‘ is Lowry.’

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'Oh, are ye the ones that have the jeweller's shop on the Parade?' she asked.

'That's right,' said Ned with modest pride.

'We have a clock we got from ye,' she said. "'Tisn't much good of an old clock either,' she added with quiet malice.

'You should bring it back to the shop,' he said in great concern. 'It probably needs overhauling.'

'I'm going down the river in a boat with a couple of chaps,' she said, going off at a tangent. 'Will you come?'

'Couldn't,' he said with a smile.

'Why not?'

'I'm only left go up the Dyke for my walk,' he said complacently. 'On Saturdays I go to Confession at St. Peter and Paul's, then I go up the Dyke and back the Western Road. Sometimes you see very good cricket matches. Do you like cricket?'

'A lot of old sissies puckering a ball,' she said shortly. 'I do not.'

'I like it,' he said firmly. 'I go up there every Saturday. Of course I'm not supposed to talk to anyone,' he added with mild amusement at his own audacity. 'My mother doesn't like it.'

'Why doesn't she like it?' asked the girl.

'She comes of an awfully good family,' he answered mildly, and only for his gentle smile, she might have thought he was deliberately insulting her. 'You see,' he went on gravely in his thin, pleasant voice, ticking things off on his fingers and then giving a glance at each finger as he ticked it off — a tidy sort of boy — 'there are three main branches of the Hourigan family: the Neddy Neds, the Neddy Jerrys and the Neddy Thomases. The Neddy Neds are the Hayfield Hourigans. They are the oldest branch. My mother is a Hayfield Hourigan and she'd have been a rich woman only for her father

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backing a bill for a Neddy Jerry. He defaulted and ran away to Australia,' he concluded with a contemptuous sniff.

'Cripes,' said the girl, 'and had she to pay?'

'She had. But of course,' he went on with as close as he ever seemed likely to get to a burst of real enthusiasm, 'my grandfather was a very well-behaved man. When he was eating his dinner the boys from the National School in Bantry used to be brought up to watch him, he had such beautiful table manners. Once he caught my uncle eating cabbage with a knife and he struck him with a poker. They had to put four stitches in him after,' he added with a joyous chuckle.

'Cripes,' said the girl again. 'What did he do that for?'

'To teach him manners,' said Ned complacently.

'He must have been dotty,' said the girl.

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Ned in mild surprise. Everything this girl said came as a shock to him. 'But that's why my mother won't let us mix with other children. On the other hand, we read a good deal. Are you fond of reading, Miss — I didn't catch the name?'

'You weren't told it,' she said quietly, showing her claws. 'But if you want to know it's Rita Lomasney.'

'Do you read much, Miss Lomasney?'

'I couldn't be bothered,' she said.

'I read all sorts of books,' he said enthusiastically. 'And as well as that I'm learning the violin from Miss Maude on the Parade. Of course it's very difficult because it's all classical music.'

'What's classical music?' she asked with sudden interest.

'*Maritana* is classical music,' he replied eagerly. He seemed to have an absolute mania for imparting instruction. 'Were you at *Maritana* in the Opera House, Miss Lomasney?'

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'I was never there at all,' she said, getting curter and curter.

'And *Alice Where Art Thou* is classical music,' he added. 'It's harder than plain music. You see,' he went on, composing signs in the air, 'it has signs like this on it, and when you see the signs you know it's after turning into a different tune though it has the same name. Irish music is all the same tune and that's why my mother won't let me learn it.'

'Were you ever at the Opera in Paris?' she asked suddenly.

'No,' said Ned regretfully. 'I'm afraid I never was out of Ireland.'

'That's the place you ought to go,' she said with airy enthusiasm. 'Sure, you couldn't hear any operas here. The staircase alone is bigger than the whole blooming Opera House here.'

It seemed as if she were just beginning to expand when two fellows came down Wyse's Hill. She rose to meet them. Lowry looked up at them and then rose too, lifting his cap politely.

'Well, good evening,' he said cheerfully. 'I enjoyed the talk. I hope we meet again.'

'Some other Saturday,' said Rita Lomasney.

'Oh, good evening, old man,' one of the fellows with her said in an affected accent, swinging round and letting on he was raising a topker. 'Do come and see us soon again.'

'Shut up, Foster,' said Rita sharply. 'I'll give you a puck in the gob.'

'Oh, by the way,' said Ned, coming back and handing her a number of *The Gem*, 'you might like to look at this. It's not bad.'

'Thanks, I'd love to,' she said insincerely, and he smiled and touched his cap again.

'You didn't say anything, did you?' he asked Foster

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with the same polite, almost deferential air.

'No, I didn't,' said Foster, backing away from him.

'I'm so glad,' Ned said, purring and grinning like a cat. 'I was afraid you might be looking for trouble.'

2

The Lomasney family were at their supper. They lived in a house on Sunday's Well, a small house with a long sloping garden and a fine view of the river and city. There were four of them, apart from Rita who was away down the country, teaching. The father was a small man in a grey tweed suit and a soft white collar several sizes too big for him. He had a ravaged brick-red face with keen blue eyes, and a sandy straggling moustache with one side going up and the other side down, and you could always tell the humour he was in by the side he pulled. In town he was known as 'Hasty Harry.' 'Great God,' he fumed, when his wife was having her first baby, 'nine months over a little job like that! I'd do it in three weeks if I could only get started.' His wife was tall and matronly and very pious, but her piety never troubled her much. A woman that survived Hasty would have survived anything. The eldest daughter, Kitty, was loud-voiced and gay and full of talk. She was expelled from school for writing love-letters to a boy. She copied the letters out of a French novel but she didn't tell the nuns that. Nellie was placider and took more after her mother. Besides, she didn't read French novels.

They heard the car stop, the squeak of the gate, the steps up the long path to the front door. Then came a ring at the door and a cheerful voice from the hall.

'Hullo, Paschal, I suppose ye weren't expecting me.'

'Tis never Rita,' said her mother, meaning that it was but that it shouldn't be.

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'As true as God, that one is after getting into trouble,' said Kitty prophetically.

'Hullo,' said Rita lightly as she slouched in, a long stringy girl with a dark, glowing face, 'how's tricks?'

'Rita, child,' said her mother, standing up, 'what happened you?'

'Nothing,' cried Rita an octave up the scale. 'I got the sack, that's all.'

'Sack,' said her father, pulling the wrong side of his moustache; 'what did you get the sack for?'

'Can't you give us a chance to get something to eat?' said Rita. She took off her hat and laughed at herself in the mirror over the mantelpiece. Then she smoothed back her thick black hair. 'I told Paschal to bring in whatever was going. I'm in the train since ten. The heating was off as usual. Cripes, I'm frizzled.'

'A wonder you wouldn't send us a wire,' said her mother as Rita sat down and grabbed some bread and butter.

'No dough,' said Rita.

'Can't you tell us what happened?' said Kitty.

'I told you,' said Rita with her mouth full. 'You'll read it all in the morning papers. The Rev. is bound to write and tell ye how I lost my character.'

'But what did you do, child?' her mother asked placidly.

'Fellow that wanted to marry me,' said Rita. 'He was in his last year at college and his old one didn't like the look of me, so she got Reverend Mother to give me the shunt.'

'But what the blazes had it to do with Reverend Mother?' asked Nellie indignantly. 'It's none of her business who you marry.'

'And don't I know that, girl?' cried Rita.

'Still, I must say you worked pretty fast,' said Kitty suspiciously.

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' Gor, if you didn't work fast in that place they'd eat him,' said Rita. ' There was only one man in the whole blooming village and he was the bank clerk. We called him "The One." I wasn't there a week when the nuns ticked me off for riding on the pillion of his bike.'

' And did you? ' asked Kitty.

' I never got a chance. They did that to every teacher on principle to give her the idea she was being well watched. I only met this fellow a fortnight ago. He was home after a breakdown.'

' Well, well, well,' said her mother without rancour. ' No wonder his mother was upset. A boy that's not left college yet. Couldn't ye wait till he was qualified anyway? '

' Not very well,' said Rita. ' He's going to be a priest.'

' A what? ' cried her father.

' All right, don't blame me,' said Rita. ' It wasn't my fault. He told me he didn't want to be a priest. That's why he had the breakdown.'

' Reverend Mother was perfectly right,' said Mrs. Lomasney severely. ' As if it wasn't hard enough on the poor boys without girls like you throwing temptation in their way. I must say you behaved very badly, Rita.'

' Oh, just as you like,' said Rita with a boyish shrug of her shoulders, and then dropped into a moody silence. She had always been the queerest of the family. There seemed to be no softness in her. She never had a favourite saint or a favourite nun ; she said it was soppy. For the same reason she never had flirtations. There was something in her that wasn't in her sisters, something tongue-tied and twisted and unhappy. She had a curious, raw, almost timid smile as if she felt that people desired no better sport than to hurt her. At home she was reserved, watchful, almost mocking. She could sit for hours listening to her mother and sisters without opening her mouth. Sometimes she mystified them by dropping a well-aimed

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jaw-breaker — about classical music, for instance — and then relapsing into a sulky silence as if she had merely drawn the veil for a moment on depths in herself which she would not permit them to explore.

She went to bed after her supper, and as her mother and sisters were sitting in the front room discussing the scandal a ring came to the front door. Nellie opened it.

‘Hullo, Ned,’ she said.

‘Hullo,’ said Ned, smiling with his mouth primly shut and his eyes wide open. With a sort of automatic movement he took off his coat and hat and hung them on the rack. Then he began to empty the pockets with the same thoroughness. He hadn’t changed much. He was thin and pale, spectacled and clever, with the same precise and tranquil manner, ‘like an old persian cat,’ as Nellie said. He read too many books. In the last year or two something seemed to have happened him. He didn’t go to Mass any longer. Not going to Mass struck all the Lomasneys as being too damn clever.

‘Guess who’s here,’ said Nellie.

‘Couldn’t,’ he replied, raising his brows mildly.

‘Rita !’

‘Oh !’ he said in the same tone. It was part of his cleverness that he never let on to be surprised.

‘She’s after getting the sack for trying to run off with a priest,’ said Nellie.

He tossed his head with a silent chuckle and went in, adjusting his pince-nez. As he was understood to be in love with Rita, this wasn’t quite what Nellie expected. Then he put his hands in his trousers pockets and stood on the hearth with his legs wide apart.

‘Isn’t it awful, Ned ?’ said Mrs. Lomasney in her deep voice.

‘Is it ?’ asked Ned, smiling.

‘With a priest ?’ cried Nellie.

‘Now, he wasn’t a priest, Nellie,’ said Mrs. Lomasney.

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‘ ‘Tis bad enough as it is without making it any worse.’

‘ Suppose you tell me what happened ? ’ suggested Ned.

‘ But we don’t know, Ned,’ cried Mrs. Lomasney.

‘ You know what she’s like when she’s in one of her sulky fits. Maybe you’d go up and have a talk to her yourself ? ’

‘ It mightn’t be a bad idea,’ said Ned.

Still with his hands in his pockets, he followed Mrs. Lomasney up the thickly carpeted stairs to Rita’s little bedroom at the top of the house. On the landing he paused for a moment to look out over the river and the lighted city behind it. Rita, wearing a pink dressing-jacket, was lying back with one arm under her head. By the bed was a table with a packet of cigarettes that had also been used as an ash-tray. He smiled and shook his head reprovingly at her.

‘ Hullo, Ned,’ she cried, reaching him a bare arm.

‘ Give us a kiss. I’m quite kissable now.’

He didn’t need to be told that. He was astonished at the change in her. Her whole face seemed to have gone mawkish and soft and to be lit up from inside. He sat on an armchair by the bed, carefully pulling up his trouser legs, then he put his hands in his pockets again and sat back with crossed legs.

‘ I suppose they’re all in a flooother downstairs ? ’ said Rita.

‘ They seem a little excited,’ said Ned with bowed head cocked a little sideways, looking like a wise old bird.

‘ Wait till they hear the details,’ said Rita, shaking her head.

‘ Why ? ’ he asked mildly. ‘ Were there details ? ’

‘ Oh, masses of them,’ said Rita. ‘ Honest to God, Ned, I used to laugh at the glamour girls in the convent. I never knew you could get like that about a fellow. ‘Tis like something bursting inside you. Cripes, I’m as soppy as a kid.’

‘ And how did that occur ? ’ Ned asked curiously.

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‘ Jay, don’t ask me. This fellow — his name was Tony Donoghue — his old one had a shop in the Main Street. He kissed me one night coming home. I was furious. I cut the socks off him. Next evening he came round to apologise. I never got up or asked him to sit down or anything. He said he never slept a wink. “ Oh, didn’t you ? ” said I. “ It didn’t trouble me much.” Bloody lies, of course. “ I did it because I was fond of you,” says he. “ Is that what you told the last one ? ” said I. Then he got into a flaming wax. “ You’re telling me to my face I’m a liar,” says he. “ And aren’t you ? ” said I. Then I waited for him to hit me but, begor, he didn’t, so I ended up sitting on his knee. . . . Talk about the Babes in the Wood. First time he ever had a girl on his knee, he said, and you know how much of it I did.’

They heard a step on the stairs and Mrs. Lomasney smiled maternally at both of them round the door.

‘ I suppose ’tis tea Ned is having ? ’ she asked in her deep voice.

‘ No,’ said Rita. ‘ I’m having the tea. Ned says he’d sooner a drop of the hard tack.’

‘ Oh, isn’t that a great change, Ned ? ’ cried Mrs. Lomasney.

‘ ’Tis the shock,’ explained Rita, throwing him a cigarette. ‘ He didn’t think I was that sort of girl.’

‘ He mustn’t know much about girls,’ said Mrs. Lomasney.

‘ He’s learning now,’ said Rita.

When Paschal brought up the tray she poured out tea for Ned and helped herself to the whiskey. He made no comment. Things like that were a commonplace in the Lomasney household.

‘ Anyway,’ she went on, ‘ he told his old one he wanted to chuck the Church and marry me. There was ructions, of course. The people in the shop at the other side of the street had a son a priest. His old one thought they’d

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never live down the scandal. So away with her up to the Rev. and the Rev. sends for me. Did I want to destroy the young man's life and he on the threshold of a great calling? I said 'twas they wanted to destroy him. "What sort of a priest would he make?" said I. Oh, 'twas a marvellous sacrifice to be called to make, and after it he'd be twice the man. Honest to God, Ned, the way she went on you'd think she was talking about doctoring an old tom cat. "He will like fun," says I. "That's all you know about Tony." "Oh, we know him well," says the Rev. "He was an altar boy here." "Did he ever tell ye the way he used to slough the convent orchard and sell the apples in town?" says I. So, begor, then she dropped the Holy Willie stuff and told me his ma was after getting into debt to put him in for the priesthood. Three hundred quid! Wouldn't they kill you with style?"

'And what did you do then?'

'Oh, then I went along to see his ma.'

'You didn't?'

'I did. Sure, there's nothing like the personal touch.'

'It doesn't seem to have worked with her.'

'A bloody old traction engine, Ned. I'd as soon try my charms on one. "I suppose they didn't do things like this in your young days?" said I. "Ah," said she, "in my day girls had no sense." I saw then she was no fool. "I want to marry Tony," said I. "You can't," said she. "What's to stop me?" said I. "He's gone too far," said she. "Begor," said I, "if he was gone farther 'twouldn't worry me. I came here to talk business with you. Reverend Mother says you're three hundred pounds in debt on account of Tony." "That's right," said MacNabs. "I'll pay you the three hundred if you'll let him marry me," said I.'

'And had you the three hundred?' Ned asked mildly.

'Ah, where would I get three hundred?' Rita replied

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ruefully. ‘And she knew it too, the old jade. She didn’t believe a word I said. So then I told her I wanted to see Tony. He was crying ; he said he didn’t want to break his mother’s heart. As true as God, Ned, the woman had as much heart as a traction engine.’

‘Well, you seem to have done it in style,’ purred Ned, putting back his tea-cup.

‘Ah, that wasn’t the half of it,’ said Rita. ‘When I heard his old ma was making difficulties I offered to live with him instead.’

‘Live with him ?’ said Ned. Even he was startled.

‘Well, go away on hols with him. Lots of girls do it. I know they do. And, God Almighty, isn’t it only natural ?’

‘And what did he say to that ?’ asked Ned.

‘Oh, he was scared out of his wits.’

‘He would be,’ said Ned, wrinkling up his nose and giving his superior little sniff as he took out a packet of cigarettes.

‘Oh, it’s all very well for you to sniff,’ she cried, bridling up. ‘You may think you’re a great fellow, all because you read Tolstoy and don’t go to Mass, but you’d be just as scared if a girl offered to go to bed with you.’

‘Try me,’ said Ned sedately as he lit her cigarette for her, but somehow the notion of suggesting a thing like that to Ned only made her laugh.

He stayed until quite late, and when he went downstairs the girls and Mrs. Lomasney came out to the hall to meet him and drag him in.

‘Well, doctor ?’ said Mrs. Lomasney. ‘How’s the patient ?’

‘Oh, I think the patient is coming round nicely,’ said Ned.

‘But would you ever believe it, Ned ?’ cried Mrs. Lomasney. ‘A girl that wouldn’t look at the side of the road a fellow was at, unless ’twas to go robbing orchards

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with him. You'll have another drop of whiskey ? '

' I won't,' said Ned.

' And is that all you're going to tell us ? ' asked Mrs. Lomasney.

' Oh, you'll hear it all from herself, surely ? ' said Ned.

' We won't,' said Mrs. Lomasney.

' I dare say not,' he said with a hearty chuckle, and went for his coat.

' Wisha, Ned,' said Mrs. Lomasney, ' what'll your mother say when she hears it ? '

' All *quite* mad,' said Ned, sticking his nose in the air and giving an exaggerated version of what Mrs. Lomasney called ' his Hayfield sniff.'

' The dear knows, I think she's right,' she said as she helped him on with his coat. Then she kissed him unexpectedly. ' I hope your mother doesn't notice the smell from your breath,' she added, and she stood at the door, looking up and down as she waited for him to wave to her from the gate.

' Ah,' she sighed as she closed the door behind her, ' with the help of God it might be all for the best.'

' If you mean that he might marry her, you can put it out of your head,' said Kitty. ' A fellow that really cared for her would kill her. He only enjoys it.'

' Ah, God is good,' said her mother cheerfully. ' Some men might like that.'

3

Inside a week Kitty and Nellie were sick to death of having Rita at home. She was too intense entirely for them. So in the afternoons she strolled down the Dyke and into Ned's little shop where she sat on the counter, swinging her legs and smoking as Ned leaned back against the shelves, tinkering at the insides of a watch with some delicate instrument. When he was finished he changed his coat and took her out to tea. He sat at the very

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back of the tea-shop in a corner, pulled up the knees of his trousers and took out a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches which he planted on the table before him with a look that almost commanded them to stay there. His face was pale and clear and bright as an evening sky when the last light has drained out of it.

‘ Anything wrong ? ’ he asked in his mildest voice.

‘ Fed up,’ said Rita, thrusting out her jaw.

‘ What is it ? ’ he asked gently. ‘ Still repining ? ’

‘ No, Ned,’ she said, ‘ I can get over that. It’s Kitty and Nellie. They’re bitches, Ned, proper bitches. And it’s all because I don’t wear my heart on my sleeve. If one of them got a knock she’d take two aspirins and go to bed with the other one. They’d have a lovely talk — can’t you imagine ? ’ “ And was it after that party that he said he loved you, Nellie ? ” And it’s all because they’re not sincere, Ned. They couldn’t be sincere.’

‘ You pay too much attention to them,’ Ned said, almost complainingly.

‘ They think I’m batty,’ said Rita. ‘ Do you, Ned ? ’

‘ I’ve no doubt that Mrs. Donoghue, or whatever her name was, thought something of the kind,’ said Ned with a tight-lipped smile.

‘ And wasn’t she right ? ’ asked Rita with sudden candour. ‘ Suppose she accepted the three hundred quid, wouldn’t I be in a nice pickle ? I wake in a sweat whenever I think of it. Where would I get three hundred quid ? ’

‘ Oh, I dare say someone would have lent it to you,’ he said comfortingly.

‘ They would like hell,’ said Rita. ‘ Would you ? ’

‘ Probably,’ he said gravely, after a moment’s thought.

‘ Are you serious ? ’ she gasped.

‘ Quite.’

‘ Cripes,’ she said, ‘ you must be very fond of me.’

‘ It looks like it,’ said Ned, and this time he laughed

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with real heartiness, a boy's laugh of sheer delight at the mystification he was causing her.

'Would you marry me?' she asked frowningly, testing the genuineness of his interest.

'Certainly,' he said, spreading out his hands. 'Whenever you like.'

'Honest to God?'

'Cut my throat.'

'And why the blazes didn't you ask me before I went down to that kip?' she asked vigorously. 'I'd have married you then like a shot. Was it the way you weren't keen on me then?'

'No,' he said matter-of-factly, drawing himself together like an old clock preparing to strike. 'I think I've been keen on you as long as I know you.'

'It's easily seen you're a Neddy Ned,' she said with amusement. 'I go after them with a scalping knife.'

'I stalk mine,' said Ned.

'Cripes, Ned,' she said with regret, 'why didn't you tell me sooner? I couldn't marry you now. 'Twouldn't be fair to you.' She looked round the restaurant to make sure that no one was listening and then went on in a dry voice, leaning one elbow on the table. 'I suppose you'll think this is all cod but it isn't. Honest to God, I think you're the finest bloody man I ever met — even though you do think you're an agnostic or something,' she added maliciously with a characteristic Lomasney flourish in the cause of Faith and Fatherland. 'There's no one in the world I'd sooner for a pal. I think I'd nearly cut my throat if I did something you really disapproved of — I don't mean something like telling lies or going on a binge,' she added hastily to prevent misunderstandings. 'That's only gas. Something that really shocked you I mean. I think if I was tempted I'd ask myself, "What would that fellow Lowry think of me now?"'

'Well,' Ned said in an extraordinarily quiet voice,

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squelching the butt of his cigarette on his plate, ‘that sounds to me like a very good beginning.’

‘ ‘Tisn’t, Ned,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘ You couldn’t understand it unless it happened to yourself, unless you fell in love with a girl the way I fell in love with Tony. Tony was a scut and a cowardly scut, but I was cracked about him. If Tony came into this place now and said, “ Rita, come on away to Killarney for a week-end,” I’d go out and buy a nightdress and tooth-brush and go with him. And I wouldn’t give a damn what you thought. I might want to chuck myself in the lake after, but I’d go. Christ, Ned,’ she exclaimed, flushing suddenly and looking as though she might burst into tears, ‘ he couldn’t come into a room but I went all mushy inside. That’s what the real thing is like.’

‘ Well,’ Ned replied sedately, apparently not in the slightest degree put out ; in fact, looking rather pleased with himself, Rita thought, ‘ I’m in no hurry. In case you get tired of scalping them, the offer will still be open.’

‘ Thanks, Ned,’ she said absent-mindedly, and while he paid the bill, she stood in the porch, doing her face in the mirror and paying no attention to the crowds who passed through the streets where the shop windows were just beginning to be lighted. As he emerged from the shop she turned on him suddenly.

‘ About that matter, Ned,’ she said, ‘ will you ask me again or do I have to ask you ? ’

‘ Just as you like,’ said Ned with quiet amusement. ‘ Suppose I repeat the proposal every six months ? ’

‘ Ah, that’d be the hell of a long time to wait if I changed my mind,’ she said with a shrug. ‘ It’s all right,’ she added as she took his arm. ‘ I know you well enough to ask you. If you don’t want me by then, you can always say so.’

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4

Ned's proposal came as a considerable comfort to Rita. It bolstered up her self-esteem, always in danger of collapse. She might be ugly and uneducated and a bit of a chancer, but still the best man in Cork — the best man in Ireland she sometimes thought — wanted to marry her, even after she had been let down by another fellow. So while her sisters made fun of her, she considered what would be the best possible occasion to give them the full weight of the proposal and its implications. Ever since she was a child she had never given anything away without extracting the last ounce of theatrical effect from it.

Justin Sullivan was a lawyer who had come to the house to court Nellie. He hadn't got Nellie, who was as slippery as an eel and had already decided that the man she was going to get was a fellow called Fahy, a solicitor, whom Justin despised with his whole heart and soul as a light-headed, butterfly sort of man. But Justin continued to visit the house as a friend of the family. There didn't happen to be any other house that suited him so well. He was a good deal older than Rita, a tall, burly man with a great broad face, a brow that was rising from baldness as well as brains, and a slow, watchful, ironic air. Like a good many lawyers, he had a way of conducting conversation as though the person he was speaking to were a hostile witness who had either to be coaxed into an admission of perjury or bullied into one of mental incapacity. Fahy simply clutched his head and retired to sit on the stairs ; the girls shot their little darts at him but he only brushed them aside ; Ned Lowry was the only one who could stand up to him, and when they argued about religion the place became a desert. Justin was a pillar of orthodoxy. 'Imagine for a moment,' he would declaim in a throaty, rounded voice that turned

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easily to pomposity, ‘that I am the Pope.’ ‘Easiest thing in the world, Justin,’ said Kitty. He drank whiskey like water, and the more he drank the more massive and logical and orthodoxy Catholic he became. At the same time under his truculent air he was exceedingly gentle, patient and understanding, and disliked the ragging of Rita by her sisters.

‘Tell me, Nellie,’ he asked one night in his lazy, amiable way, ‘do you talk like that to Rita because you like it or because you think it’s good for her?’

‘How soft you have it!’ cried Nellie. ‘We have to live with her and you haven’t.’

‘That may be my misfortune rather than my fault, Nellie,’ said Justin with a broad smile.

‘Is that a proposal, Justin?’ asked Kitty shrewdly.

‘Scarcely, Kitty,’ said Justin. ‘You’re not what I might call a good jury.’

‘You’d better be careful,’ said Kitty. ‘If you say much more you’ll have her dropping in on your mother.’

‘Thanks, Kitty,’ said Rita with a flash of cold fury.

‘I hope,’ said Justin stubbornly, ‘if Rita felt inclined to do anything of the sort, my mother would have sense enough to realise the honour.’

When Justin got up to go, Rita accompanied him to the hall.

‘Thanks for the moral support, Justin,’ she said in a quiet tone, and threw her overcoat over her shoulders to go as far as the gate with him. When he opened the door they both stood and gazed about them. It was a moonlit night; the garden, patterned in black and silver, sloped to the quiet roadway where the gas-lamps burned with a dim green light, and in the farther walls gateways shaded by black trees led to steeply sloping avenues that wound about moonlit houses on the river’s edge.

‘God Almighty,’ she said in a hushed voice, ‘isn’t it lovely?’

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'Oh, by the way, Rita,' he said, slipping his arm through hers, 'that was a proposal.'

'Janey Mack,' said Rita, squeezing his arm, 'they're falling.'

'What are falling?' he asked in surprise.

'Proposals,' said Rita with a laugh.

'Why?' he asked. 'Had you others?'

'One,' said Rita.

'And did you accept it?'

'No,' said Rita doubtfully, 'not quite. At least I don't think so.'

'You might consider this one,' said Justin with unusual humility. 'You know, of course, that I was very fond of Nellie. At one time I was very fond of her indeed. You don't mind that, do you? It's all over and done with now and there aren't any regrets on either side.'

'No, Justin,' she said, 'of course I don't mind. If I felt like marrying I wouldn't give it a second thought. But you'd better understand that I was very much in love with Tony too, and that's not all over and done with yet.'

'I know that, Rita,' he said gently. 'I know exactly how you feel. We've all felt like that at your age.' If he had left it at that everything would have been all right, but Justin was a lawyer, which meant that he liked to leave things absolutely ship-shape. 'But that won't last for ever, you know. In a month or so you'll be over that, and then you'll wonder what you saw in that fellow.'

'I don't think so, Justin,' she said with a crooked little smile, not altogether displeased to be able to enlighten him as to the utter hopelessness of her position. 'I think it will take a great deal longer than that.'

'Well, say six months,' said Justin, prepared to yield a point on that particular matter. 'All I ask is that in one month or in six months, whenever you've got over

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your regrets for this — this amiable young man (momentarily his voice took on its familiar ironic ring), you'll give me a thought. I'm old enough not to make any more mistakes. I know I'm fond of you and I feel sure I could make you happy.'

'What you really mean,' said Rita, keeping her temper with the greatest difficulty, 'is that I wasn't in love with Tony at all. Isn't that it?'

'Not quite,' said Justin judiciously. Even if a serenade had been added to the moonlight and the girl he was in love with, it could scarcely have kept him from correcting what he considered a false deduction. 'I've no doubt you were very much attracted by this — this clerical Adonis ; this Mr. Whatever-his-name-is, or that at any rate you thought you were, which in practice comes to the same thing, but I also know that that sort of thing, though it's painful enough while it lasts, does not last very long.'

'You mean yours didn't, Justin,' said Rita tartly.

'I mean mine or anyone else's,' said Justin pompously. 'Because love — the only sort of thing you can really call love — is something that comes with experience. At your age you can hardly know the meaning of it yet.'

'But at your age, of course, you can?' she said murderously.

'At any rate, I believe so,' said Justin.

'Honest to God, Justin,' she said, withdrawing her arm and looking at him with suppressed fury, 'I think you're the thickest man I ever met.'

'Good night, my dear,' said Justin with perfect good-humour, and he raised his cap and took the few steps to the gate at a run. She stood gazing after him with folded arms. At the age of eighteen to be told that there can be anything one doesn't know about love is like a knife in the heart.

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5

Kitty and Nellie grew so tired of her moodiness that they persuaded her mother and father that the best way to distract her mind was to push her into another job. Rita shrugged her shoulders and let them push. An old aunt in a convent in England was written to and found her a job there. Rita neither objected nor enthused.

‘But why England?’ asked Ned.

‘Why not?’ replied Rita.

‘Wouldn’t any place nearer do you?’ he asked mildly.

‘I wouldn’t be far enough away from them,’ she said bitterly.

‘But why don’t you make up your own mind?’

‘I’d sooner see what’s in theirs first,’ she said with a short laugh. ‘I might give them a surprise yet.’

She certainly gave them the surprise. On Friday she was to leave by the Fishguard boat and on Wednesday they gave the party for her. She let them do that too without interesting herself much in the matter. Wednesday was the half-holiday and it rained steadily all day. The girls’ friends all turned up. Most of them were men : Bill O’Donnell of the bank, who was engaged to Kitty ; Fahy the solicitor, who was Justin’s successful rival for Nellie ; Justin himself, Ned and a few others. Hasty soon retired with his wife to the dining-room to read the *Echo*. He said all his daughters’ young men looked exactly alike and he never knew which of them he was talking to.

Bill O’Donnell was acting as barman. He was a big man, bigger than Justin even, with a battered boxer’s face and a negro smile. He carried on loud conversations with everyone he poured out drink for.

‘Who’s this one for, Rita?’ he asked. ‘A bottle of Bass for Paddy. Ah, the stout man. Remember the New Year’s Day in Bandon, Paddy? Remember how

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you had to bring me up to the bank in evening dress and prop me up between the two wings of the desk ? Kitty, did I ever tell you about that night in Bandon ? '

' Once a week for the past five years, Bill,' said Kitty.

' Nellie,' said Rita, ' I think it's time for Bill to sing his song. *Let Me Like a Soldier Fall*, Bill ! '

' My one little song,' said Bill with a roar of laughter.

' My one and only song, but I sing it beautifully. Don't I, Nellie ? Don't I sing it fine ? '

' Grand,' said Nellie, who was vamping music-hall songs and looked up at his big, beaming moon-face shining over the piano. ' As the man said to my mother, " Finest bloody soprano I ever heard." '

' He did not, Nellie,' Bill said sadly. ' You're making that up. . . . Silence, please ! ' he shouted joyously, clapping his hands. ' Ladies and gentlemen, I must apologise. I ought to sing something like Tosti's " Good-bye," but the fact is, ladies and gentlemen, I don't know Tosti's " Good-bye." '

' Recite it, Bill,' said Justin amiably.

' I don't know the words of it either, Justin,' said Bill. ' In fact I'm not sure if there's any such song, but if there is I ought to sing it.'

' Why, Bill ? ' asked Rita innocently. She was wearing a long black dress that threw up the unusual brightness of her dark bony face. All the evening she had seemed as though she were laughing to herself.

' Because 'twould be only right, Rita,' said Bill with great melancholy, putting his arm about her and drawing her closer to him. ' You know I'm very fond of you, don't you, Rita ? '

' And I'm mad about you, Bill,' said Rita candidly.

' I know that, Rita,' he said mournfully, pulling at his collar as though to give himself air. ' I only wish you weren't going, Rita. This place won't be the same without you. Kitty won't mind me saying that,' he

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added nervously, cocking his eye at Kitty who was flirting on the sofa with Justin.

'Are you going to sing your blooming old song or not?' asked Nellie, running her fingers over the keys.

'I'm going to sing now in one two minutes, Nellie,' he said ecstatically, stroking Rita fondly under the chin. 'I only want Rita to know the way we'll miss her.'

'Bill,' said Rita, snuggling up to him with her dark head on his chest, 'tell me quick, would you like me to stop at home?'

'I would like you to stop at home, Rita,' he replied, stroking her cheeks and eyes. 'You're too good for the fellows over there.'

'Oh, go on doing that,' she said hastily as he dropped his hand. 'It's gorgeous, and you're making Kitty mad jealous.'

'Kitty isn't jealous,' said Bill fondly. 'Kitty's a lovely girl and you're a lovely girl. I hate to see you go, Rita.'

'Well, damn it all, Bill,' said Rita briskly, pulling herself free of him. 'As you put it like that, old man, I won't go.'

'Oh, won't you?' said Kitty meaningly.

'You needn't worry any more, Bill,' said Rita. 'It's all off.'

Justin, who had been quietly consuming double whiskies on the sofa, looked round lazily.

'Perhaps I ought to have mentioned,' he boomed, 'that the young lady has just done me the honour of proposing to me and I've accepted her.'

Ned Lowry, who had been enjoying the little scene between Bill and Rita, looked at him for a moment in mild surprise.

'Bravo, bravo!' cried Bill, clapping his hands delightedly. 'A marriage has been arranged and all the rest of it — what? I must give you a kiss, Rita. Justin, you don't mind if I give Rita a kiss?'

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'Not at all, not at all,' replied Justin with a lordly wave of his hand. 'Anything that's mine is yours, old man.'

'You're not serious, Justin, are you?' asked Kitty.

'I'm serious,' said Justin. 'I'm not yet quite certain whether your sister is. Are you, Rita?'

'What?' asked Rita.

'Serious,' said Justin.

'Why?' asked Rita. 'Trying to give me the push already?'

'We're much obliged for the information,' Nellie said ironically as she rose from the piano. 'Now, maybe you'd oblige us further and tell us does my father know?'

'Hardly,' said Rita coolly. 'It was only arranged this evening.'

'Well, maybe 'twill do with some more arranging by the time daddy is finished with you,' said Nellie furiously. 'The impudence of you! How dare you? Go in at once and tell them!'

'Keep your hair on, girl,' said Rita as she went jauntily out of the room. Then Kitty and Nellie began to squabble viciously with Justin. They were convinced that the whole scene had only been arranged by Rita to make them look ridiculous. Justin sat back and began to enjoy the sport. Then Ned Lowry struck a match and lit another cigarette, and something about the careful quiet way he did it drew everybody's attention. Rita came back, laughing.

'Well?' asked Nellie.

'Consent refused,' growled Rita, bowing her head and pulling the wrong side of an imaginary moustache.

'What did I tell you?' said Nellie.

'You don't think it makes any difference?' asked Rita drily. 'Don't you know he'll do whatever mummy tells him?'

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'I wouldn't be too sure of that,' said Nellie. 'What else did he say?'

'Oh, he hadn't the foggiest notion who I was talking about,' said Rita with a toss of her head. '"Justin Who?" says he. "How the bloody hell do you think I can remember all the young scuts ye bring to the house?!"'

'Was he mad?' said Kitty.

'Hopping,' said Rita.

'He didn't call us scuts?' asked Bill in a wounded tone.

'Oh, begor, he did,' said Rita.

'Did you tell him he was very attached to me when I gave him the tip for "Golden Boy" at the Park Races?' asked Justin in his deep voice.

'I did,' said Rita. 'I told him you were the stout block of a fellow with the brown hair that he said he liked so much the day of the races. Then he said he wanted me to marry the thin fellow with the specs. "Only bloody gentleman that comes to the house."'

'Is it Ned?' cried Nellie.

'I suppose so,' said Rita. 'And why didn't you say so?' says I. '"Jesus Christ, girl," says he, "I feed ye and clothe ye. Isn't that enough without having to coort for ye as well? Next thing, ye'll be asking me to have a few babies for ye." Anyway, Ned,' she added with a crooked, almost malicious smile, 'you can always say you were the family favourite.'

Ned put down his cigarette carefully and sprang up with a broad smile, holding out his hand.

'I wish you all the luck in the world, Justin,' he said.

'I know that well, Ned,' boomed Justin, and he rose and caught Ned's hands in his own two.

'And you too, Miss Lomasney,' said Ned gaily.

'Thank you, Mr. Lowry,' she replied with the same crooked little smile.

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6

Justin and Rita were married. Ned, like all his family, was very sensible. He didn't make a fuss or break the crockery or do any of the things people are expected to do under the circumstances. He went once or twice to visit them and took Rita to the pictures when Justin was away. About the same time he began to go out with an assistant in Halpin's ; a gentle, humorous girl with a great mass of jet-black hair and a long, pointed, melancholy face. You saw them everywhere together.

He also went regularly to Sunday's Well to see the old couple and Nellie — she wasn't yet married. One night when he called Mr. and Mrs. Lomasney were both at the chapel, but Rita was there before him. Justin was away. It was months since she and Ned had met, because she was having a baby and was very near her time. It made her self-conscious and rude. Three or four times she said things that would have maddened anyone else.

'And how's little Miss What's-her-name ?' she asked insolently.

'Little Miss Who ?' Ned asked mildly.

'Miss — how the hell can I remember the name of all your dolls? The Spanish-looking one that sells the knickers in Halpin's.'

'Oh, she's very well, thanks,' said Ned primly.

'Oh, it'll be a very suitable match,' said Rita, all on edge. 'Between ye, ye'll have the ring and the trousseau at cost price.'

'How interested you are in her!' exclaimed Nellie.

'I don't give a damn about her,' said Rita. 'Would Señorita What's-her-name ever let you stand godfather to my footballer, Ned?' she asked.

'Why not?' said Ned mildly. 'I'd be delighted, of course.'

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' You have the devil's own neck to ask him,' said Nellie, ' after the way you treated him.'

' How did I treat him ? '

' Codding him along like that for years and then marrying a man that was twice your age.'

' 'Twas his own fault,' said Rita with a mischievous smile.

Ned rose and took out a packet of cigarettes. Rita was leaning very far back in her chair. Laughing up at him, she took a cigarette and waited for him to light it.

' Come on, Rita,' he said encouragingly. ' As you've gone so far you may as well tell us the rest of it. What had you against me ? '

' Who said I had anything against you ? ' she said maliciously. ' Didn't I tell you distinctly when you asked me to marry you that I didn't love you ? Maybe you think I didn't mean it ? '

He thought for a moment and then raised his brows.

' I did,' he said quietly.

She laughed.

' I had nothing against you, Ned,' she said at last. ' Kitty and this one were the only ones I had anything against. They forced me into getting married.'

' Well, the impudence of you ! ' cried Nellie.

' And isn't it true for me ? ' Rita said sharply. ' Didn't you try and drive me out of the house ? '

' We didn't, but anyway, that's no reason why you couldn't have married Ned.'

' I didn't want to marry Ned. I didn't want to marry anyone.'

' And how did you find out ? ' asked Ned.

' I didn't.'

' Strange,' he said, sitting down and crossing his legs.

' There's nothing strange about it. I didn't care about anyone except Tony, but as I had to marry someone I

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thought I'd have a gamble on it and marry the first of ye that came to the house.'

'But you must have been mad,' said Nellie indignantly.

'Of course I was mad. I sat at the window the whole evening, looking out at the rain. I hoped 'twould be Ned. It happened to be Justin — so I married him. I saw him coming in the gate and he waved to me with the old brolly. I ran downstairs to open the door for him. "There's an old aunt of mine sick," says he, sticking the gamp in the hall-stand, "so I came here for my supper." "Justin," says I, grabbing him by the coat, "if you still want to marry me, I'm ready." He gave me a dirty look — you know Justin! "Young woman," says he, "there's a time and place for everything." And upstairs with him to the lavatory. Talk about romantic engagements! Curse of God on the old kiss did I get off him even!'

'I declare to God,' said Nellie in measured tones, 'you deserved worse.'

'I know,' cried Rita, laughing. 'When 'twas all over I nearly dropped dead.'

'Oh, so you came to your senses?' asked Nellie ironically.

'Ah, to be sure I did. That's the trouble with Justin; he's always right. He knew I wouldn't be married a week before I forgot all about my bold Tony. God, the idiots we make of ourselves over fellows!'

'And I suppose 'twas then you found out that you'd backed the wrong horse?' asked Nellie.

'Who said I backed the wrong horse?' Rita snapped.

'Oh,' said Nellie innocently, 'I thought that was what you were telling us.'

'You got it all wrong, Nellie,' Rita replied drily. 'You should get your ears examined. If I did back the wrong horse I wouldn't be likely to tell you — or Ned either.'

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She looked mockingly at Ned, but her look belied her. He rose and flicked his ashes neatly into the fire. Then he stood with his back to it, his hands behind his back, his feet spread out on the hearth.

' You mean,' he said quietly, ' if I'd come earlier you'd have married me ? '

' If you'd come earlier,' said Rita, ' I'd probably be asking Justin to stand godfather to your brat. And how do you know, Ned, but Justin would be walking out the Señorita ! '

' Then maybe you wouldn't be quite so interested whether he was or not,' said Nellie knowingly.

Ned turned and lashed his cigarette savagely into the fire. Rita looked up at him mockingly.

' Go on,' she taunted him, ' say it, blast you ! '

' I couldn't,' he said bitterly.

A month later he married the Señorita.

THE END

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